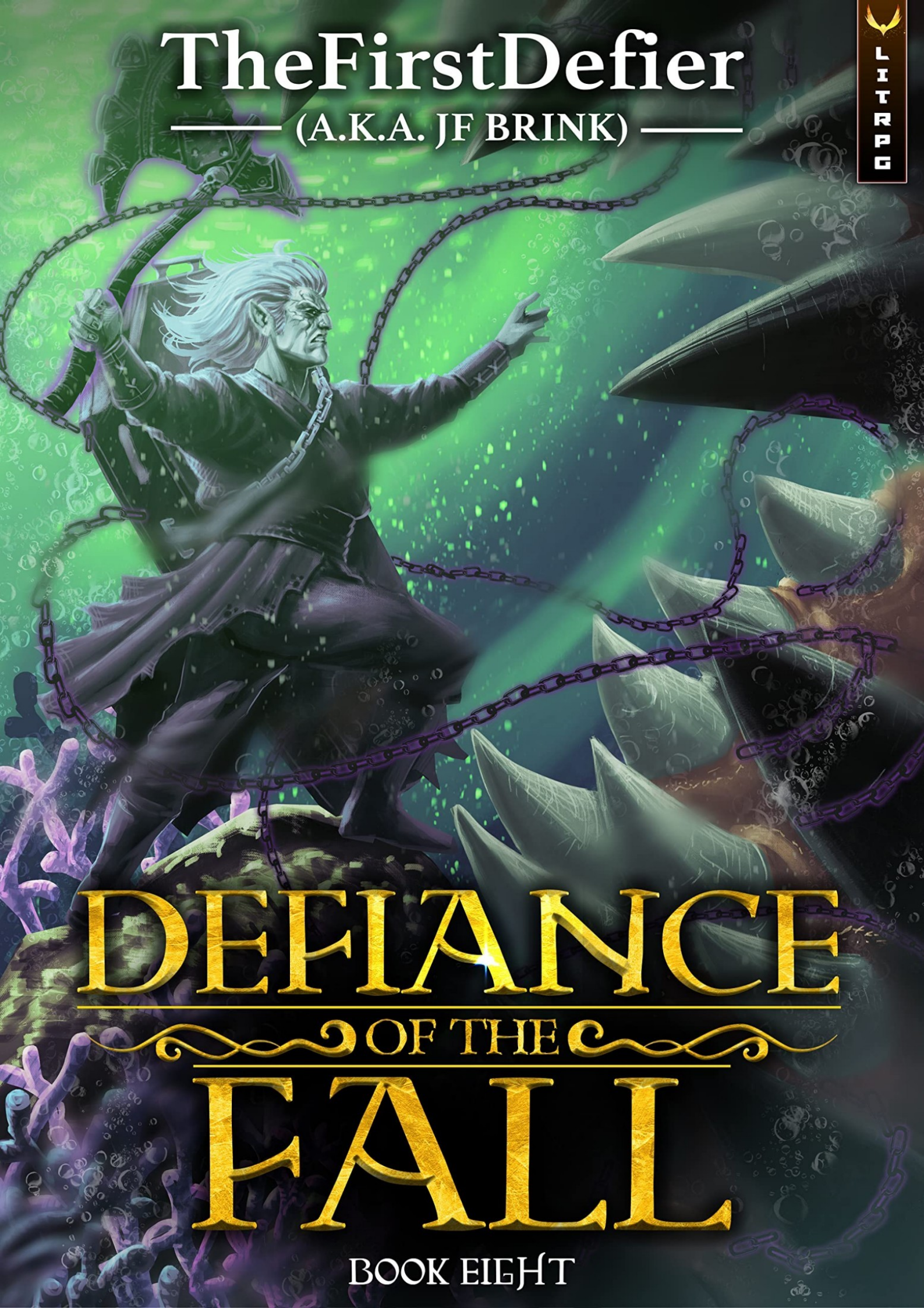


The First Defier

— (A.K.A. JF BRINK) —

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DEFIANCE

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BOOK EIGHT

DEFIANCE OF THE FALL

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STOCKING UP

Cathey and her entourage left the balcony overlooking the central region of Twilight Harbor, leaving Zac lost in thought. A few hours ago, he didn't even know that Twilight Harbor had a trial like the Twilight Ascent. Now, he'd suddenly signed up for a three-year-commitment.

Was it a good thing or was he biting off more than he could chew?

"They probed our souls with some sort of treasure," Vilari muttered. "I wasn't able to block it out."

"They did?" Zac exclaimed. "I didn't notice anything."

"Young master's soul is strong, but you ultimately aren't a Soul Cultivator," Vilari said with a slight smile.

"What's your take on the situation?" Zac asked.

"Cathey's soul was stable throughout. I think she was mostly truthful in her words," Vilari slowly said. "The large one was threatening, but the small one would be whom you'd have to worry about. I sensed wild fluctuations in his soul every time you were disrespectful to the Draugr."

"A real mess," Zac sighed. "Well, no point in staying here. Are you feeling better?"

"Much better, thank you."

"Alright, let's go," Zac grunted as he stood up. "The place Cathey is putting us up in doesn't sound too bad."

They left the incensary and found a subdued Nala waiting outside. Needing to consider his next step, he had Nala take them to the high-quality hotel on a disk partly owned by Clan Sharva'Zi. There was no point in avoiding that place now that he'd already been spotted. It truly was luxurious.

The hotel was a vast forest, where each room spread out like a mansion surrounded by wilderness. The forests were not the deathly and seemingly haunted forestry of the Dead Zone back on Earth. Beautiful trees with silvery leaves and white trunks were plentiful here, alongside similarly colored bushes that made up some of the undergrowth. They grew what looked like metallic pinecones, which chimed when rustled by the wind.

Instead of having to slog through the forest, an attendant handed them unique teleportation tokens that took them to a small square outside the walled courtyard leading to his mansion. Upon request, Nala was provided a token, and Zac dismissed the attendant. Before he and Vilari went inside the mansion, he sent Nala away, asking she return in twelve hours.

Catheya's sudden appearance had put him a bit on the spot, even if he'd prepared a bit beforehand. He had been forced to make some quick decisions, but felt things had worked out for the best. The deal she offered was fair, as far as Zac could tell. Catheya's party would get the first three Life-Death Pearls they found as payment for providing the path and method to push away the restriction of the Twilight Ocean.

After the first three, the group—consisting of eight members at most—would draw lots and distribute the pearls. Seeing as there were up to one hundred pearls to gather, which usually grew in the same area according to Catheya, he might get his hands on more than ten Life-Death Pearls. These kinds of items generally lost their efficacy after a few uses, so they'd probably be more than enough for him.

Still, the mission meant traveling with both Catheya and strangers for months. Not only were there risks of betrayal, his real identity could be exposed. It didn't look like Catheya managed to find anything out during their meeting, but that didn't mean she'd bought his spiel hook, line, and sinker.

Thankfully, their agreement was just verbal for now, and Zac would only have to sign a proper contract before getting the VIP skill.

Before then, he needed to figure out his plan. One of the main goals for this trip had been to find some basic methods and treasures for himself and the Einherjar. The second goal was to search for opportunities to strengthen himself. The return of Leandra drove home how weak he was, and visiting this magical metropolis only reinforced that realization.

But joining Catheya to visit the depths of the Twilight Ocean... was perhaps more than he bargained for. Despite the lethality in there definitely being high, the risk of exposure weighed heavier on his shoulders. Going at it alone was no doubt a much safer option, as he could stay closer to the entrance if he found the challenge too great.

However, Zac soon found his resolve. The whole reason to set out was to get stronger, and those pearls seemed almost tailor-made to push at least two of his Dao Fragments to the next level. With his odd constitution, progressing in Dao seemed to require rarer and rarer treasures. He couldn't just back away when an opportunity presented itself.

Still, going in blind and dumb was out of the question. Two months remained until the Twilight Ascent started, and he needed to make the most of it. The crystal Nala provided mentioned the qualifier required to join in on the trial. Thankfully, Catheya set aside a slot for him, allowing him to avoid what seemed like a huge time sink and focus on his other tasks.

There was no lack of E-grade cultivators in a place like this. In fact, they could be counted in the billions. The qualifiers lasted one hundred rounds, where you're matched with random warriors, and each victory awarded one point. The ten million people with the highest points then entered the Twilight Ascent, along with the one million seeded warriors.

Each warrior was required to fight five battles a day, with one day of rest in between every fight day. A total of forty

days to get a spot. He didn't have time for that. Not when he needed to focus on his cultivation.

The question was, what should he do with Vilari.

“Are you interested in the Twilight Ascent?” Zac asked, turning to his silent follower.

“No,” Vilari said after some thought. “It would require me to break through within two months, and it's simply too short a time. I am not ready to harm my foundations for this trial, and I feel I would be a hindrance to you even if I evolved.”

“Alright. But staying in this place after I leave...”

“How about you send me back before you enter the trial? I can bring any items you procure back to Port Atwood,” Vilari ventured. “It will give me time to shore up my foundations before you return.”

“Sounds good,” Zac agreed, and they went over everything they'd encountered so far and set up a plan for the coming two months.

He'd decided to tie himself to Catheya's chariot, and with her umbrella of protection, he could act with less restraint over the next months. This was a huge opportunity for him and Port Atwood. His pockets were filled with money, and there were so many things to spend it on. He didn't have access to a place as flourishing as Twilight Harbor back home. In fact, he wasn't sure if one even existed.

Vilari had a far better understanding of not only his undead forces, but also his living ones after spending ten days with Joanna. She helped him put together a shopping list, after which Zac started reading the information missive on the Twilight Ocean with greater scrutiny.

He'd been at a disadvantage during the recent negotiations since he didn't really understand all the details of the Twilight Ascent. A weakness he needed to shore up before running into Catheya again.

After reading the whole missive twice, he concluded Catheya had essentially spoken the truth. The Life-Death Pearls were well-documented, High-quality treasures of the

Twilight Ocean, and were just as rare as she indicated. Perhaps even more so. Finding them was largely dependent on dumb luck, according to the missive.

Of course, that didn't mean Catheya was lying about her plan. The Twilight Ocean had been around for millions of years and opened up once every thousand years or so. That meant the ancient factions had sent their members into the Mystic Realm thousands of times. There was no way they hadn't figured out some hidden methods. Ones not detailed in the public missives.

Zac also found out why Catheya wanted to enlist his help. He was pretty confident in his strength, but it was suspicious how ready she was to fork out so many resources in order to get him to join her party. Part of it was definitely his connection to her ancestor. Although Zac did have some unique benefits in the Mystic Realm.

Catheya had mentioned an array to weaken the pervasive pressure inside the Twilight Ocean. She'd also neglected to fully explain what a detriment it was. She made it sound like the only reason people didn't go to the depths was the risk of running into enemies. Turns out that wasn't the case at all.

Most simply wouldn't survive in the depths of the Mystic Realm.

Rather than a restriction, it would be more apt to call the invasive energy a poison. The undead were poisoned by the life-attributed components in the atmosphere and the living the opposite. Everyone was able to filter out the unwanted parts to some degree, but were ultimately weakened by the environment.

There were thankfully various ways to counter this effect: pills that helped filter Twilight Energy, arrays, and some skills that could weaken it. But ultimately, the deciding factor on how deep you could go was your own body. The Twilight Ocean was a System-controlled Mystic Realm, and as such, had probably been modified to have its current effect.

The higher your level, the more the Twilight Energy tried to burrow into you, essentially turning the whole thing into a

level-based trial. That meant people with greater accomplishments would get farther. Even better, soul strength helped. It didn't really mean all Mentalists had an advantage, though, since their bodies were usually weaker than normal cultivators and therefore less resistant to the corrosion.

Zac was likely the perfect member for Catheya to enlist. He couldn't be certain, but between his high Efficiency and unusually powerful soul, he should be among the best at resisting the poison. Meanwhile, he wasn't so powerful that they felt him capable of taking them all out.

What Catheya didn't know, is Zac was probably in an even better position than she assumed. The weird, muddled energies of the Twilight Ocean might be a troublesome poison to her, but to him, it was food for his **[Void Heart]**. And if the accumulated life-attuned energies ever got too much, he could simply swap races. It was like he was entering the Mystic Realm with cheat codes.

There was only one caveat: this advantage wasn't as pronounced compared to other elites who could resist the effect almost as well as he did. The kind of elites Catheya had mentioned, running around with Dao Branches and high Efficiency, would still be a big threat to him.

Such a risk wasn't enough to dampen Zac's excitement. The Life-Death Pearls were just one of the innumerable valuables waiting in the Twilight Ocean. He'd definitely regret it if he didn't go.

Thus, it was with extreme vigor he and Vilari set out the next day.

"Which is the best pill house in this place?" Zac asked when they found Nala waiting outside their courtyard.

"The Karabas Clan," Nala said without hesitation. "They're a local faction of Spectrals, but rumors have it they're backed by an imperial Eidolon clan. Their heritage in the Dao of Alchemy is extremely deep, and their wares have low toxicity."

"Hmm... Take me there," Zac said.

There wasn't any rush in buying pills or other necessities, but Zac wanted to fill his Spatial Treasures with necessary items as quickly as humanly possible. You never knew if Catheya's master or one of her elders would suddenly appear, forcing him to immediately activate his escape bracelet.

The trip took three hours—even with the spatial manipulation running along the Twilight Rivers—ending at a death-attuned platform with a decent position to the Twilight Ocean. This one was covered by a dense haze, making it impossible to guess at its interior.

The Miasmatic wall was pretty unwelcoming. Zac instructed Nala to shoot straight through, and a vast metropolis appeared on the other side. Tens of thousands of crystalline towers covered the surface. They made Zac think of the onyx pillars that surrounded the Splinter of Oblivion during the Hunt.

Did ghosts prefer to stay inside these types of crystals rather than proper houses?

There was one building that looked different, a twenty-kilometer-wide complex surrounded by medicinal clouds rather than a Miasmatic haze.

“Young master, I cannot enter this place, so I will wait outside,” Nala said as she landed. “This time, I think young master's attendant—”

“That's fine. You two stay here,” Zac said, getting off the small vessel. A dense, deathly aura started to swirl around him, almost like space congealed with his Dao, and Nala released an audible gasp.

It was exactly like how Catheya and her Titan follower, Qirai, acted. They used a small hint of their aura to act as some sort of proof of their standing. Majority of people could glean all kinds of things from the aura. Most importantly on how condensed it was.

For example, Catheya and her follower's auras were almost as powerful as each other, while Catheya's was vastly more condensed. That meant Catheya was at a lower level, yet possessed the same combat strength. What did this signify?

That she was an elite with powerful backing. It was pretty easy to mask this phenomenon, but very hard to mimic.

Catheya presented the clear aura of an elite., but even the Draugr scion's aura was a lot less condensed than Zac's when he didn't mask it.

He appeared in front of a huge arch a second later, where a ghost already waited for him. She was a beautiful humanoid, her form far more corporeal and defined than Triv's or any of the other ghosts that had appeared on Earth.

"Does young master have a Membership Token?" the ghost asked.

"I just arrived in this sector," Zac said with a small shake of his head, trying to emulate the aura of someone with a formidable background.

"Of course." The attendant smiled as a black crystalline token appeared out of nowhere. "Please accept this token. It will make young master's future purchasing experiences easier."

Zac nodded, taking the token, and entered the opulent complex that eclipsed even the Big Axe Coliseum. Just like that, he was a VIP customer, simply by flashing his face. He'd come a long way since having to force his way through the commoners' entrance over at the Zethaya Pill House.

Zac was met by an enthusiastic clerk and swept off to a private room. A lot of undead wandered around, looking at displays or perusing the store's inventory recorded on crystals. Being a pureblood Draugr clearly had its advantages.

"My name is Yilian. What can we assist young master with today?" the clerk, another spectral who took the form of some elf-like humanoid, asked as she handed one of the inventory crystals to Zac.

"I'm partaking in the Twilight Ascent and wanted to see if your store has some items that could be of use," Zac said.

"Our stock definitely can't match that of the grand establishments of the Heartlands, but it is at the level of the kingdom's Medium-tier establishments, housing up to Peak D-

graded pills and compounds thanks to a certain patronage.” Yilian smiled, clearly with some pride.

Zac was actually a bit surprised. To boast a stock that could match a B-grade kingdom’s mid-tier pill house was quite a statement for a shop in a remote sector like this. He’d already asked Nala to make sure. The sector housing Twilight Harbor, the Zervereth Sector, was only C-grade. It seemed a lot more powerful than Zecia, but was ultimately just a slightly more bustling frontier sector.

Zac doubted the Zethaya Clan would dare to make such a proclamation and compare itself to stores in a B-grade human empire. It made him look at the inventory crystal with even greater enthusiasm. Of course, he tried to play it cool on the surface as he scanned the endless rows of products.

“Perhaps you could make some suggestions,” Zac said after a few minutes. “I’m bringing followers, so I need a few sets of healing, soul-mending, Soldier Pills, and perhaps berserking pills. Top-quality, of course.”

Zac obviously wasn’t bringing any followers. Except, would a vaunted, pureblood Draugr hailing from a proper kingdom need to buy his pills in a store here? Wouldn’t his clan provide them? A mere fib about followers smoothed those questions over. He needed a large number of pills in either case since there was no telling when he would get access to buy items for his undead side after leaving Twilight Harbor.

“The Twilight Ascent is a Heaven-controlled event, and the E-grade Ascent has a limit of Pseudo D-grade pills,” the clerk said. “Our top pill line is called the Dawn series, and is available both as Peak E-grade pills and Pseudo D-grade. The line has everything you require, except berserking pills. We currently sell special kits at discounted prices, if the young master is interested.”

Zac blankly looked at the attendant, trying to hide his confusion. Pseudo D-grade? What the hell was that?

THE VALUE OF MONEY

The general meaning of a Pseudo D-grade pill was somewhat self-explanatory. Zac had just never heard of any such terminology for pills before. Was it pills designed for Half-Step Hegemons or merely extra-good pills for E-grade cultivators? He'd already confirmed Half-Step cultivators wouldn't be able to join the trial, so it should be the latter.

Asking would immediately ruin his façade, forcing Zac to look on as the screen in front of him changed to the Dawn pill series the attendant mentioned. With three kits to choose from, Zac almost felt like he was online shopping as he read the eye-opening descriptions, each boasting huge savings compared to buying single pills.

The smaller kit included eight different types of pills and the medium one eleven. The eight basic pills held two types of healing pills based on the type of injury, one soul-mending pill, two types of antidotes, a soldier pill and a soul restoration pill, and something called [**Dawn Life-Shield**].

The medium kit added one more type of antidote and two premium healing pills—one for the body and one for the soul. All three were the kind you'd save as a last resort, and not something you'd use to speed up recuperation, judging by the details. The Peak package only included twelve different pills, adding one called [**Dawn Awakening**].

The pills in both the Peak E-grade and Pseudo D-grade kits were the same, with only their grade differing. After reading things through, he started to get an idea of what was going on.

Pseudo D-grade actually seemed to be the same thing as Low-grade D-grade pills in the Zecia Sector.

Zac wasn't exactly sure why it was termed differently here. He guessed it might be similar to how Zecia fuddled the grades for their factions, making things sound more impressive than they actually were.

“What is the **[Dawn Life-Shield]**?” Zac asked.

“It is a pill especially designed for the Twilight Ocean, and also shows decent use when exploring the living territories,” the clerk explained. “It helps weaken the corrosive effect of Twilight Energy. The Pseudo D-grade version naturally has a far greater protective effect.”

“Will it work even in the heart of the ocean?” Zac asked a bit dubiously.

“Unfortunately, that's impossible,” Yilian sighed. “The inner reaches of the Twilight Ocean ultimately rely on your own methods. The E-grade pill is completely ineffective that far inside, and the Pseudo D-grade pill only lessens the strain by 5%—5% that can make the difference between life and death!”

“Hmm... And the **[Dawn Awakening]**?” Zac asked.

“It's a proprietary pill that allows cultivators to make the most out of the treasures in the depths of the Twilight Ocean,” the clerk said. “The pill is actually made from herbs from the Twilight Ocean itself, and the supply is limited. We believe it will be sold out before long, so if young mast—”

“And what does it do?” Zac asked with a raised brow.

“Ah, my apologies,” the specter said with a bow. “I simply get a bit excited when talking about such a great item. Its effect is simple yet exquisite: harmonization. There are many unique Supreme items in the depths of the Twilight Ocean that cannot be taken outside, forcing you to imbibe them during the trial. The **[Dawn Awakening]** allows you to temporarily harmonize with the Twilight Ocean, which in turn will help you to gain more from these Supreme treasures.”

Zac's brows rose, urging the ghost attendant to continue at seeing his interest.

“It's a must-have item for those planning on exploring the deeper parts of the Mystic Realm. It can be the difference between a fate-changing breakthrough and getting stuck at the precipice,” Yilian exhorted. “The only downside of the **[Dawn Awakening]** pill, is that it can only be used once, so it's best saved until the perfect opportunity presents itself.”

Zac nodded in understanding, and felt it really was a must-have pill if it worked as advertised.

He didn't immediately place his order, first reading through the kits once more. Each kit included two pills of the cheaper variants and one each of the top-quality. The pills that helped against the Twilight Energy worked for one hour, and you could only eat one per day, meaning they were meant to be used during fights or other critical situations.

“I'll take one big Pseudo D-grade, three middle Pseudo D-grade, and five hundred small Peak E-grade packages,” Zac said. “However, for the small kits, I want the **[Dawn Life-Shield]** exchanged for **[Dawn Life-Ward]**.”

The **[Dawn Life-Ward]** was almost the same type of pill as the one included in the normal kits. The difference being they were a general pill the undead used in life-attuned environments. Although useless against Twilight Energy, it worked a lot better under normal situations, which was exactly what Zac needed since he was planning on bringing those pills back home.

The clerk's eyes lit up, as this was a pretty big order. It obviously couldn't match the purchasing power of a Hegemon, but those kinds of customers didn't appear every day, even in a place like this. And if they did come, it wasn't the turn of someone like Yilian to serve them and get the commission.

“The Life-Ward pill can absolutely be exchanged. One High-quality Pseudo D-grade Kit is priced at 2 D-grade Nexus Coins. The middle comes to 1.1 D-grade Nexus Coins each, for a total of 3.3. The five hundred lower kits come to 3 D-grade Nexus Coins. For a purchase of this magnitude, I can

give a 15% discount, and we'll round down to 7 D-grade Nexus Coins." The clerk smiled. "Is there anything else young master requires?"

Zac froze when he heard the price. So expensive?

He'd gained a pretty decent understanding of general prices over the past years, and the quoted prices were not just a little more expensive compared to what similar items should cost in establishments like the Zethaya Pill House. They were in the range of between ten and one hundred times more expensive, going by the Peak-quality pills.

This single purchase would not only have completely bankrupted him if not for Leandra's bestowment, he wouldn't actually be able to stomach it. The biggest culprit was obviously the Pseudo D-grade pills, where one big kit cost more than three hundred Peak E-grade kits. It wasn't like he couldn't afford it—he also didn't like the feeling of getting taken for a ride.

"These prices... are quite steep," Zac slowly said with a frown.

"Ah, my apologies," the attendant said with some embarrassment. "I can assure you we are not trying to overcharge our valued customers. I am sure young master has heard a thing or two about frontier sectors such as our Zervereth. It is true, prices are normally significantly lower in small C-grade sectors, but the Twilight Ocean is different because our connection to the higher realms is much closer due to the wormholes.

"We both get a large number of esteemed visitors such as young master, and there is regular trade going on between Twilight Harbor and the empire. As such, prices have almost reached the same level as in the higher-grade kingdoms. If the young master is interested in bargain shopping, you would have to travel to other parts of the sector or perhaps even another sector altogether."

Zac digested the new information, and couldn't help feeling like a country bumpkin. At least the attendant had gotten the wrong idea and looked up to him rather than looked

down on him. He'd always guessed things would be more expensive in the flourishing parts of the Multiverse, just like how it was back on Earth before the integration. But he never expected the difference to be this massive.

He almost wanted to slap himself for not buying a mountain of resources before coming to this place. Too late for regret now.

"Hm, a shame. I was looking forward to making some bargains." Zac shrugged. "Well, it doesn't matter."

"I understand the feeling," Yilian said with a knowing smile. "Young master is not the first one to be met with this surprise. It is possible to enlist the Space Gate Guild to take you to the opposite side of the sector, where prices are roughly 40% of here. Truthfully, there is not much of interest over there, and the volumes you'd need to purchase to make up for the transportation fees and import tariffs..."

"Perhaps if I get the time. I'm thinking of nurturing a small squad for adventuring after this trial. After all, there should be an ample supply of bodies inside the Twilight Ascent. Let's look at your leveling resources as well," Zac said, and Yilian's smile grew even wider.

Zac emerged from the pill shop an hour later, a mountain of resources added to his Cosmos Sack, with Yilian passionately leading him all the way. Altogether, he spent over eighty D-grade Nexus Coins, of which half was for himself and the other half was for the Einherjar. It was a shocking sum and a harsh wake-up call to how poor he'd been before his bestowment.

He had bought thousands of standard-quality leveling pills that would allow all his followers to sweep through the first sets of levels at the E-grade. Zac also bought ten sets of top-quality Race Upgrade pills, along with tons of cheap compounds for use in medicinal baths. The pills were mainly meant for his elites back home, but also for himself in case nothing better cropped up at the auction in a few days.

The spectral attendant led him to a small garden outside of the market, where he found Vilari enjoying some High-quality

incense. No doubt a small complimentary gesture after he started dropping some serious money in their establishment. The Mentalist stood up with a smile. They set off, soon passing through the haze hiding the plateau where Nala waited.

“I want to look at some spare weaponry as well,” Zac said to Nala, and she set out toward another plateau.

“By the way, can you explain the prices of things?” Zac asked his guide as she steered the vessel through the Void, prompting her to look over with confusion.

“Young master seldom leaves the clan and rarely purchases things himself. The prices of items are a bit unclear, especially in a foreign sector such as this,” Vilari added.

“Oh, I see!” Nala beamed. “Prices have essentially standardized over the long eons, and they only really move if there is some unexpected shortage. Items are generally graded between Low and Peak quality. A Low-quality material generally costs between one to five Nexus Coins of matching grade per unit. So, a Low E-grade metal might cost five E-grade Nexus Coins per kilogram. Whereas herbs might cost the same per stalk. The unit depends on what kind of item it is.

“A processed item of a similar grade generally costs twice their raw components with some sort of minimum fee,” Nala added. “The difference is a remuneration for the craftsman and to allow for some chance of failure.”

Zac was inwardly shocked. It really was a huge difference between Twilight Harbor and back home. He recalled feeling like a tycoon after slaughtering beasts for a few days back on Earth, making over 100 million Nexus Coins from kill rewards alone. Here, that only amounted to a handful of Low-quality pills.

No wonder most cultivators were broke.

“From there, it’s very straightforward. Middle-grade items are ten times as expensive as Low-grade, and the same goes for High and Peak-quality items. This means that a Peak E-grade pill costs a thousand times as much as Low E-grade

pills, generally somewhere around five thousand to ten thousand E-grade Nexus Coins.

“Above that are Pseudo D-grade pills, the grade I guess young master generally uses. Those are pills partly made from D-grade materials, but are still consumable by E-grade cultivators. These are around ten times more expensive than Peak E-grade items, although the span is a lot higher there,” Nala said.

“Why?” Vilari asked after seeing Zac’s blank look.

“Some Pseudo D-grade pills might contain 2% D-grade materials, and others 20%,” Nala explained. “Higher-grade materials are generally dangerous to imbibe, so it requires a far more skilled Alchemist to put 20% D-grade materials into a pill while keeping it absorbable for E-grade warriors. Those alchemists would naturally charge a higher fee.

“A Pseudo D-grade pill can cost anywhere between fifty thousand and five hundred thousand E-grade Nexus Coins. The risk of getting tricked when buying these kinds of items is the highest, where a common item is marketed as something full of expensive materials. Of course, the Karabas Pill House wouldn’t stoop that low,” Nala explained. “The lower grades are mostly standardized, and there are no Pseudo D-grade raw materials. They are either E-grade or D-grade.”

“Anything else?” Vilari asked.

“Um...” Nala hesitated, unsure what would be pertinent information. “The efficacy increase per quality stage is roughly a factor of two. A Middle-quality pill is twice as good as a Low-quality at ten times the price. The span is naturally a lot greater among the Pseudo D-grade pills.”

Zac nodded as though that were a matter of course; inwardly he swore at the usurious pricing practices. He just paid a thousand times extra for items that were less than ten times as good as Low-quality goods? Then again, eating a healing pill with eight times the efficacy was priceless when it was the difference between life and death.

“Furthermore, this is just how pricing works for readily available products,” Nala continued with some longing in her eyes. “When it comes to unique natural treasures with effects that can’t be replicated by cheaper means, the price can go anywhere. I have heard of unique E-grade treasures costing as much as Peak D-grade pills. Some items like that will likely appear in the grand auction before the Twilight Ascent.”

Zac made a mental calculation and could confirm the prices Yilian gave him were more than fair if the pills lived up to the quality the Karabas Pill House was known for. He no longer felt like a financial tyrant, though his resources were still shocking for someone at his level. He also realized the cash infusion might only last him to the Middle-stages of Hegemony or thereabouts.

A future worry, and one that wasn’t all bad. Prices had gone up. That meant the value of anything he’d find in the Twilight Ocean would also go up. If he managed to get his hands on a few once-in-a-century Supreme treasures, he’d make enough money to actually make some Hegemons green with envy.

The group eventually landed on another disk, and Zac emerged from a blacksmith clan’s storefront three hours later with a small mountain of weapons for his followers. Zac managed to loot quite a bit from the undead incursion, but they didn’t suit all his people.

The smithy belonged to the local Elementals, who catered to both the unliving and the alive, so Zac was also able to procure an upgraded set of gear for the Valkyries. The new spears obviously couldn’t match the Spirit Tool that Joanna used, but among non-spiritual E-grade weapons, they were extremely high quality.

The following days continued in much the same manner, and Zac stocked up on everything he or Earth lacked.

He hadn’t initially planned on buying this much, but the level of Twilight Harbor far surpassed what he’d expected, considering it had connections to multiple, proper B-grade forces. He’d even been forced to buy a few new Spatial Rings,

having filled the one he'd gotten from Vilari's predecessor to the brim. He didn't want to walk around with ten Cosmos Sacks attached to his belt; that would ruin his image of a noble Draugr.

Zac also followed up on Calrin's sage advice and stocked up on huge quantities of materials that were scarce in the Zecia Sector. He'd bought fifty thousand Soul Crystals in one go, despite each one costing ten thousand E-grade Nexus Coins. It was a huge expenditure, one Zac knew he would be able to make a profit on back home even at this price point.

His inquiries into Soul Crystals also exposed something extremely unexpected. Crystals in general were actually not graded in Twilight Harbor, simply called Low, Medium, High, and Supreme-quality Nexus Crystals or Attuned Crystals. High-quality crystals were the same as D-grade crystals back in the Zecia Sector, and the Low-quality the same as standard F-grade Nexus Crystals.

The Low-quality Nexus Crystals were at twice the price in Twilight Harbor compared to Zecia, clocking in at one hundred Nexus Coins each. The Medium-quality cost ten thousand, and the High-quality cost one E-grade Nexus Coin each. Above that were the Supreme Crystals, which didn't seem to have any equivalent in the Zecia Sector.

They would set him back one thousand E-grade Nexus Coins each, and were mainly used by Peak E-grade cultivators and Half-Step Hegemons. Early-stage Hegemons generally used them to recuperate lost energy, but the crystals used by greater Hegemons weren't actually Nexus Crystals at all.

They used something called Cosmic Crystals, a far superior natural energy crystal. Their pricing was the same as Nexus Crystals, though priced in D and C-grade Nexus Coins instead. However, only Low and Medium-quality Cosmic Crystals were publicly available. The two higher grades were aimed at Monarchs and were essentially strategic resources of the biggest clans.

Cosmic Crystals were probably what were called C-grade Nexus Crystals in the Zecia Sector, but Calrin couldn't even

get his hands on Low-grade ones there. Perhaps they'd pop up on auctions on D-grade worlds now and then, but you definitely couldn't purchase them in stores.

Even Zac would explode if he tried to absorb energy from a Low-grade Cosmic Crystal. They required users to have a Cultivator's Core with their vast energy storage capabilities. Zac still bought ten Low-quality Cosmic Crystals and one Medium-quality. There was no telling when he'd have direct access to them in the future, so he figured he might as well keep a few around. He also bought a large store of Supreme Crystals, both attuned and unattuned.

Things calmed down after five days, at which point Nala seemed to finally become inundated to Zac's shocking reserves of wealth. She'd accompanied him for one of his smaller purchases at an incensary, and that alone ran up a tab of over fifty thousand E-grade Nexus Coins, which almost made Nala faint.

"Where to today, young master?" Nala asked when she picked up him and Vilari on the sixth day.

"Hmm..." Zac mused. "I have bought most of what I need for now. I guess it's time to visit the Eldritch Archivals."

INHERITANCE CRYSTAL

The little flying vessel shot toward the disk where the Dao Repository was housed. Zac's shopping spree had not only stocked up on things his little planet sorely needed, but also given Zac a decent understanding of Twilight Harbor as a whole. The past days doubled as a crash course that you simply couldn't get from reading a missive.

He'd seen tens of thousands of warriors who, just like him, were stocking up and preparing for the Twilight Ascent. He even saw quite a few Hegemons making their final purchases. As it turned out, this generation's Twilight Ascent was a double-grade event. Thankfully that didn't mean Zac would have to compete with a bunch of Hegemons. They had their own trial happening simultaneously.

Usually, the Twilight Ascent was an E-grade trial, with it occasionally being swapped out by a D-grade version for Hegemons. Even rarer was the Monarch event, which only took place once every 250,000 years or so. The last one was just 20,000 years ago, and also the last time the Twilight Lord had been seen in public. Many believed he entered and gained some big opportunity that would allow him to take the next step.

The double-grade event was even rarer than the Monarch event. The prevalent guess was that the Mystic Realm had an overabundance of energy and treasure, which resulted in two trials in parallel dimensions instead of one. Each time such an event had taken place historically, it resulted in both amazing treasures being discovered and mass casualties.

It was no surprise the atmosphere in Twilight Harbor was absolutely electrified.

Vilari had mostly tagged along during the past days for the experience, making a few purchases for her cultivation. One of them was a Soul-Boosting Array they found in the store of an array clan, where Zac made a few custom orders of his own. It would help speed her cultivation up now that she was swapping away from the **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]**.

His total spending over the past days reached over fifteen thousand D-grade Nexus Coins, which was simply a monstrous amount of money, even for E-grade cultivators in Twilight Harbor. Such an investment would completely transform every aspect of his forces. From defenses to cultivation standards to depth of heritage.

He'd definitely have a few Hegemons among his followers in a century or two, unless they were all pigs in disguise.

Most importantly, he had prepared a slew of materials meant to improve almost every facet of his own cultivation. The items he bought, though mostly things readily available, were the best of the best. Which was saying something with the exponential costs of High-quality products.

He doubted even Catheya could enjoy the kind of resources he prepared for himself. Unless her master was a lot more generous compared to how most clans operated. Even then, some of these items were simply backups meant to be used in case he had to flee quickly or if he didn't find the things he needed in the auction in a few days.

The auction was bound to have amazing things, but that came with other factors to consider when bidding. This time, there might even be Late-stage Monarchs present, and offending them with only a fake clan as backup was suicidal. He'd already discarded any thought of getting the Peak items, and was hoping to snatch a couple of useful things. So long as he was willing to overpay a bit.

Any further than that was risking his and Vilari's lives. He had avoided any ambushes so far thanks to his pure Draugr heritage, but he knew that he'd need to stay clear of the

spotlight for a while after his massive spending spree. After all, while order was pretty good in Twilight Harbor, there was no lack of desperate people.

That was fine for Zac. The auction was tomorrow, and he'd enter seclusion after it was over. But first up, was the skills.

Nala landed her flying vessel in front of a building that looked like a supersized gothic cathedral with thousands of enormous Miasmatic fractals floating in the air.

"Young master, we've been expecting you," a ghost attendant said as Zac walked toward the entrance with Vilari in tow. "We've been given instructions from the mistress to help you out to the best of our abilities. First, let me add a hundred years to your token."

Zac nodded in thanks, and his three-week visa suddenly turned into a century-long entitlement. He didn't know if adding a whole century was to showcase the company's resources or if it was just an expression of goodwill. In either case, he wouldn't turn down something like this.

Most continents charged by the week to outsiders, and the fee to stay a hundred years without joining a force must be exorbitant. As for buying a plot of land and becoming a native, that required both wealth and deep connections.

"I'm here to pick out a skill from the VIP section as well," Zac said.

"Certainly," the attendant said. "However, there is the matter of the contract... Also, young master's attendant cannot follow into the inner sanctum."

"I know," Zac said, glancing at Vilari.

The Mentalist didn't appear to mind. She rather seemed to be looking forward to perusing the skills in the public section.

"See if you find any skills you like and I'll buy them for you," Zac said, walking away, led by another attendant toward the area where the Supreme skills were kept.

“Mr. Arcaz Black, I presume? Welcome,” an elderly Draugr said with a smile when Zac reached the tightly secured inner sanctum. “I am Revault Sharva’Zi. The young mistress told me about your arrival. Please peruse this contract at your leisure. After signing, I will take you to the Inheritance Crystals.”

This old man was clearly a Hegemon, yet he had to call Catheya the “young mistress.” Zac guessed Revault was a branch member native to Twilight Harbor rather than someone sent here from the Heartlands. Zac perfunctorily greeted the Draugr and started scanning the crystal’s contents. There was nothing unexpected in the list of clauses for what essentially looked like an employment contract.

The distribution of pearls was clearly stated, and Zac’s only obligation was to help fight in case of ambushes or attacks, and to help run the purity array for his allotted time. The contract mostly ended after they were done harvesting pearls, with some exceptions. An additional clause barred clashes among the members of the group for the duration of the Twilight Ascent.

There were also provisions that Zac could freely attack anyone attacking him and so on, though that was already guaranteed through the Apostate of Order.

“There’s no clause barring Catheya from attacking me? Just for me attacking her or the others?” Zac said with a raised brow.

“Truthfully, there is not much use in putting such a clause into the contract due to her master being powerful enough to break it,” Revault said. “That’s why multiple clauses are worded as though Mistress Catheya or other members are under no contractual obligation at all. The same goes for the other members of the party.”

Zac slowly nodded and read through the contract once more. It was true. Zac was essentially freed from any obligation at the first whiff of betrayal. He just wouldn’t be able to preemptively attack the others unless he was ready to withstand a contract backlash. He eventually infused some

energy into the crystal, which prompted a System screen to appear.

Revault smiled after Zac confirmed his employment. “This way.”

They passed through a series of extremely powerful arrays to reach an underground vault.

The room was pretty simple, filled with a series of light pillars that contained a crystal hovering inside each one. In front of each pillar was a plaque, probably describing the skill.

There were only twenty or so Inheritance Crystals, but that by itself was a show of wealth considering there was always demand but never enough supply. For Clan Sharva’Zi to be able to put a dozen top-tier skills in a remote region like Twilight Harbor was impressive. This place was obviously just one remote branch among hundreds of others.

Zac walked from crystal to crystal, carefully reading the descriptions. Every skill sounded extremely powerful, but they also often came with strict requirements to bring the most out of them. Thankfully, the Eldritch Archivals were a lot more professional when it came to descriptions compared to Brazla. He was currently looking at a hovering green crystal with red runes covering it.

[Endless Repose. Peak E-grade, Upgradeable. Vitality, Dexterity, Spear-related Daos, Poison-related Daos. Creates a storm of poisonous spear tips with extreme penetrating power that can break past even High E-grade defensive skills. Each stab creates a restrictive force equivalent to a Middle-grade Restrictive Skill and administers poison. Can be refitted to work with other sharp weaponry such as needles, thorns, and claws.]

Zac read the description with interest, but soon shook his head and moved on. The minutes passed as Zac went from pillar to pillar in search of the most suitable skill. Almost every one felt enticing to some degree, and it took a while to narrow it down to two.

[Deathlock. Peak E-grade, Upgradeable. Strength, Endurance, Vitality, Death-related Daos, Restrictive-related Daos. Creates a number of abyssal graves that bind and lock down enemies. Also creates an absolute domain that disables up to High-grade Movement skills. The skill at Peak mastery can even restrain weak Hegemons if infused with a suitable Peak Dao Fragment.]

[Abyssal Phase. High E-grade, Upgradeable. No attribute affinity, Death-related Daos. Transforms the user into an abyssal wraith. During transformation, the user is nigh invulnerable, nigh invisible, and extremely hard to detect. Peak-quality movement speed boost.]

One Peak skill aimed at restraining, and one high movement skill. The efficacy of **[Deathlock]** spoke for itself. It was a restraining skill that matched extremely well with his attributes, and could even be empowered by his Fragment of the Coffin. It was a perfect complement to his class, allowing him to completely lock down the enemies inside **[Profane Seal]**, for example, and then finish them with **[Blighted Cut]**.

He initially considered getting a massive wide-scale finisher like **[Arcadia's Judgment]**, but Zac eventually decided against it. That was simply not the type of archetype his undead class had. It was more about stacking advantages in his favor with restrictions, domains, and corrosion. He was intractable and inevitable like death itself. A precise and ruthless army who whittled down the enemy while taking minimum losses themselves.

Eventually, the enemy would be worn out, at which point Zac could end them in one swift stroke.

The second skill also provided extreme benefits. It was not only an amazing movement skill, but it even provided multiple additional benefits. It almost seemed like a perfect skill from the description. The best movement skills were generally Dexterity based, which was a problem for his Strength-focused classes, yet this one had no such affinity at all.

Furthermore, it provided a slew of other benefits. Nigh invulnerability and invisibility? Zac could almost imagine

turning into an abyssal wraith after he trapped his enemies inside his cage, avoiding harm while his enemies fell one by one. It was also purely death based, which suited his Dao, and he could fuse it further at the D-grade. There was only one thing that didn't quite add up.

“Why is [**Abyssal Phase**] classified as a High-grade skill if it provides Peak movement speed and all kinds of other benefits?” Zac asked.

“It's the energy consumption,” the old Draugr sighed as he looked at the Inheritance Crystal with some wistfulness. “The skill turns you into a nigh-invulnerable wraith and allows you to move through a subdimension with such speed, it might as well be considered teleportation. Such energy requirements are immense. Especially since you need to phase back and forth if you want to use the skill repeatedly.

“The effect is among the best I've seen for a skill of this grade, considering that it not only provides extreme speed, but also protection. But a movement skill with such high demands can ultimately not be considered Peak quality, especially when activating the skill takes a while even for the most talented warrior, which can be lethal in a heated fight,” the old man lamented.

Zac hummed in understanding. It was true, a skill that cost too much Cosmic Energy was ultimately useless. His new skill, [**Arcadia's Judgment**], cost a whopping 25% of his energy reserves while still at Early mastery. That was fine in the end, being a true finisher skill. What if [**Loamwalker**] demanded that kind of energy per step? He'd never use it.

But his situation was unique. Not only was his energy pool massive thanks to his high attributes, he even had [**Force of the Void**] to completely circumvent the downside of a slow charge-up. The question was if it was worth it or if it was better to take the Peak restraining skill and get a Common movement skill from the public repository.

Ultimately, the various benefits of the movement skill were too alluring. He already had multiple restraining skills, and it wasn't impossible that he'd get another one for the level 125

quest that always provided the second class skill of the E-grade. After all, the class was called Fetters of Desolation, yet it hadn't provided him with any such skill yet.

"It sounds interesting. I'll take [**Abyssal Phase**]. Who knows, I might be able to perfect it," Zac said with a small smile. "If not, it might serve as a good source when forming my own skills in the future."

"Very well." Revault nodded and took out a small crystal ball from his Spatial Ring.

A shudder spread out through the room, and the hovering skill crystal disappeared into thin air. Zac's eyes widened a bit, as he hadn't realized he'd been looking at an illusion. Though unable to touch the crystal through the protective sphere, he'd still sensed its energy emanations.

A large black book appeared in front of Zac, emitting an extremely powerful aura, even eclipsing the Draugr Hegemon.

"Lord Book," the old man said with a small bow.

"[**Abyssal Phase**], paid for with contribution points," a soothing androgynous voice emerged from the book as it flipped pages until one depicting a black chest appeared.

The chest flew off the page, leaving it blank, and Zac quickly stowed the item. He obviously wouldn't learn the skill here. Using an Inheritance Crystal was like a skill impartment and an epiphany rolled into one. Better save it for when he returned to the hotel.

"Thank you," Zac said. "Can I purchase one of the skills here as well?"

"I am afraid not," Revault answered with a shake of his head. "Family rules. Truthfully, the main purpose of selling these limited skills is to provide favors and make connections with various powerhouses and clans, so we cannot sell them wholesale. What if a powerful warrior arrives one day and finds our stores empty?"

"I understand." Zac nodded, though he knew there would always be exceptions.

Status and power were everything. They were aware he was an elite hired by Catheya, which might garner some respect but not abject deference. His true heritage was obscure, intentionally so because he didn't actually have one. In comparison, if the son of an undead prince arrived, he could probably leave with half the skills in this place if he wanted to.

Also, if Zac had some rare treasures to barter with, then the Eldritch Archivals would definitely be keener on doing more business.

"I'll also take a look at the public skills, then," Zac said.

"I hope you'll find something useful. I daresay our clan is fully committed to this branch, so our heritage is not much worse than the average kingdom store. Furthermore, our limit on the VIP floor is one purchase per century. You're very welcome to return after a hundred years has passed."

Being told to come back in a hundred years almost sounded like a curse to an earthling like Zac, but he knew it wasn't meant that way. The old man almost came across like a kindly old grandpa, but he was probably somewhere between Medium and High D-grade. His lifespan was no doubt measured in the tens of thousands, and a hundred years to him was the equivalent to a few months for the average pre-integration human.

"Thank you for your guidance, elder," Zac said and bowed slightly before he left for the floor beneath.

The issue of not having a movement skill in his Draugr form was finally solved, but there were other things he needed to shore up to turn himself into a perfect all-rounder.

SUSPICIONS AND AUCTIONS

The skills in the public section of the repository were mostly Middle-stage, which meant the equivalent of a skill you'd get from an Uncommon class, though slightly weakened from the transcription. A few skills were High-grade. Most of them were either out of stock or had some sort of drawback that made them less popular.

The Eldritch Archivals were in the same situation as most other merchants in Twilight Harbor. A lot of high-end stock geared toward E-grade warriors had been sold out long before Zac arrived. After all, the Twilight Ascent only opened so often, and many would be dead or long past the E-grade by the next time it opened.

Everyone wanted some final upgrades before entering to increase their survivability rate and the potential returns they could get.

Zac perused the store for an hour and settled on two more skills for himself. The first was called [**Gorehew**], a pure Strength-based Medium E-grade skill meant for axes, two-handed swords, polearms, and other larger bladed weapons. It was meant as an upgrade for [**Unholy Strike**] since Zac had essentially given up on that skill.

It was well suited to his constitution, but Zac ultimately had to prioritize using his skill fusions on transforming his other skills into ones that suited his path better. [**Unholy Strike**] worked fine, but charging up his muscles with enough Miasma to make a difference at his current level took way too much time. [**Force of the Void**] didn't work on that skill

either, perhaps because it worked by gradually expanding his muscles.

[**Gorehew**] could be used repeatedly in battle, just like [**Nature's Edge**]. It obviously wasn't at the level of his own skill, but it did have a good feature. As he slaughtered enemies with the skill, the attack would gain a temporary boost in power and area of effect. The boost was also stackable to a degree. Overall, a decent skill to clear out a large number of weak enemies at a low cost when his tactic of whittling down enemies was a waste of time.

Zac didn't have any plans on using it in the future. It was simply a temporary skill that would serve him well until he reached the D-grade.

The second was a healing skill called [**Undying Mark**]. This one allowed you to continuously infuse Miasma until you formed a mark on your body. That mark was essentially like a stored healing spell. At low proficiency, you'd be able to create three marks, and at Peak proficiency, five in total. Of course, the healing effect would also increase with every increase in proficiency.

Its strong point was that the healing skill could actually be used in battle for an almost instantaneous regeneration. The downsides were that it took hours to form the marks and the effect wasn't anything special. Zac figured it was better than nothing and added it to his repertoire.

Vilari had a better haul. She got three skills for herself, two of which she even felt were usable as a base for skill fusions.

Zac was about to exit the repository, but he stopped when he saw Catheya waiting by the gates. It was the first time he'd seen her since their initial meeting. Zac put his guard up.

"I heard you've made your choice. Be careful. [**Abyssal Phase**] was a skill an external elder of my clan learned around eighty thousand years ago. He was killed by a lightning-quick strike before he had a chance to activate the evolved version." Catheya smiled. "It's quite lopsided, with both immense strengths and demerits."

“I have other defenses to rely on.” Zac smiled back. “Is everything arranged?”

“You’re so business-minded, just like your... junior brother. He kept asking me one question after another, like his time was gold.” Catheya laughed. “But yes, everything is arranged. My master was quite impressed with you, and has signed off on you. As for the auction, I’ll come pick you up tomorrow.”

“Your master has checked up on me?” Zac said with surprise, his heart almost jumping up into his throat. “He’s free enough to spy on an E-grade cultivator?”

Zac had been alert the whole time traveling through Twilight Harbor and hadn’t felt a single thing. His bracer usually warmed up when someone was trying to inspect him, but the few times it had happened, he always managed to find the source. It was usually curious onlookers who hung around outside the shops, perhaps looking for marks to scam or just gathering intelligence.

Nothing warned him of a probe from a hidden C-grade Monarch. It was an important reminder. If some of those old monsters wanted him dead, then it was over. He wouldn’t even have a chance to start generating an Annihilation Sphere or use his defensive bangle before he was turned into atoms.

“He worries, considering he can’t enter that place. More than one promising imperial has fallen inside the Twilight Ocean over the years.” Catheya shrugged before she gave him a deep look. “Besides, he was curious about the one who has some sort of connection to my ancestor. He could confirm you are pureblood Draugr just like we thought, but not even slightly related to Ancestor Be’Zi... Just where did you pop up from?”

“The universe is full of little mysteries. You’ll go crazy if you try to understand everything.” Zac smiled.

“For a while I guessed you were a progenitor just like Zac Piker, perhaps even from the same planet,” Catheya mused, ignoring Zac’s comment. “After all, some unintegrated worlds hold the uninitiated unliving. An undead forming alliance with

the living against the Undead Empire? What a scandal that would be.”

“Now you’ve changed your opinion?” Zac said with a raised brow.

“I can’t confirm any exact numbers., but I would say you have spent over three thousand D-grade Nexus Coins over the past week. Even if you sold ten recently integrated planets in a place like Zecia, you wouldn’t reach such a net worth. That kind of wealth can’t be found on a frontier progenitor. It needs millennia to be accumulated. You must have a very powerful master, probably at Peak C-grade. Perhaps even a Divine Monarch,” Catheya said with a slightly victorious smile.

“You’ve been keeping track of my purchases?” Zac asked with a frown.

“Of course I have,” Catheya snorted. “More importantly, word of a mysterious pureblood Draugr spending a prodigal amount of wealth on all kinds of basic necessities has spread across the harbor in certain circles. Mind telling me what you’re up to?”

“I’ve just recently started gathering some followers of my own.” Zac shrugged. “I took the opportunity to buy basic items for them.”

Zac kept his face impassive, more than happy to let Catheya form a misguided hypothesis of his origin. In fact, that had even been part of the consideration when going on such a wanton shopping spree. Catheya had participated in an integration herself, and should be clear about the potential gains that came with it. Zac himself had been good for just over 100 billion F-grade Nexus Coins before Leandra had thrown money at him. Furthermore, most of that was dividends his sister generated.

As for Divine Monarchs, he’d heard something about it before. Apparently, it was a stage similar to a Half-Step D-grade cultivator. But while Half-Step D-grade essentially signified failure, a Divine Monarch was the opposite. Each grade evolution was a larger step than the one before, and required preparations to even attempt reaching B-grade.

Zac didn't know the details, but if you managed to become a Divine Monarch, you essentially had the base qualifications to attempt a breakthrough. Of course, there were no doubt a bunch of other requirements to become an actual Autarch, considering none had appeared over millions and millions of years in the frontier sectors.

"I'm starting to believe your story. You might actually be a real disciple of my ancestor or her partner," Catheya muttered. "I still can't understand the connection between you and Zac Piker though... But I will figure it out sooner or later."

"Best of luck," Zac said, trying his best to hide his discomfort. "If there's nothing else, I'll see you tomorrow."

"What a bore," Catheya sighed. "I'll pick you up at your place."

Zac returned to his compound with the help of Nala, feeling like a thousand eyes were peeping at him. He was playing with fire getting along with Catheya, but he had already started reaping the rewards. He held a lot of expectations for **[Abyssal Phase]**, and his other skills weren't too shabby either.

Besides, it looked like his mother hadn't lied when it came to the array. Catheya's master couldn't find anything wrong with him, which meant not a single person in the whole Zecia Sector should be able to spot his perfected Duplicity Core. At least he worked under that assumption. He'd probably have been caught by now if his human ancestry or real identity were exposed.

Zac shrugged off any errant thoughts as he started walking toward his courtyard. A cough from behind stopped him in his tracks.

"This, ah, young master... this is the last day I was hired for," Nala hesitantly said.

"Oh, right." Zac thoughtfully nodded. "If you're available, I'd like to hire you until the Twilight Ascent starts. Same rate."

"Ah? Really?" Nala exclaimed, her eyes lighting up. "Absolutely. I will work hard to help out. I'll talk with my

father to see if he has more information he can share.”

“That’s fine.” Zac honestly didn’t hold much hope for him divulging high-value secrets. “You don’t need to come tomorrow though. I’ll be busy.”

He and Vilari entered the courtyard and retired to their own cultivation chambers to go over their new skills. Zac took out the mysterious crystal he got from Lord Book, who Zac guessed was a Peak D-grade or even a C-grade Tool Spirit.

Activating an Inheritance Crystal was similar to a normal skill crystal. Only, when Zac infused the crystal with energy, a flood of memories and impressions assailed him. It wasn’t as real as Dao Visions, but rather discordant snippets of the life of the external elder of the Sharva’Zi Clan. It was almost like when he’d seen fragments of Alea’s life flash by.

The elder who left the skill behind was not a Strength-based fighter like Zac. He’d been a poison master with a hybrid fighting style. Part of it was based around daggers for close combat, buoyed by traditional large-scale poison attacks. His attributes focused on Vitality and Dexterity.

He’d not gotten [**Abyssal Phase**] from his class, but rather gained it as a reward in an extremely deadly Mystic Realm. The elder had sometimes used it defensively, and mostly focused its benefits as a tool for ambush.

The idea was for the skill to allow you to get into the heart of an army, unleash an avalanche of carnage, and slink away in the chaos unscathed. The detriment was obviously the activation time and massive energy consumption, almost costing as much energy as a finishing strike.

Zac witnessed the elder using it hundreds of times in different situations. Fleeing, attacking, ambushing. The skill had clear drawbacks, but the elder had almost become a virtuoso in controlling the rhythm of a battle to the point he could activate the skill if needed. His fighting style was wholly different compared to Zac’s. Still, he was a cultivator who progressed much further than Zac himself.

The scenes provided ample inspiration, and he only opened his eyes a few hours later.

[E] Abyssal Phase – Proficiency: Middle. Become the Abyss. Bring them into your embrace. Upgradeable.

Zac was elated by the results. He actually managed to push the skill to Middle proficiency in one go, effectively catching up with most of his old E-grade skills. It also felt like he'd personally used the skill dozens of times. It wouldn't take long to properly integrate the ability into his personal combat style.

It didn't even feel like he needed to try it out since it was almost one with him. Instead, he turned his attention to the other two skills. Most of the night was spent charging the three Healing Brands, which appeared along the upper part of his spine. He also practiced using **[Gorehew]** for an hour in his courtyard, although it was hard to get a proper sense of the skill without any enemies.

Morning came, and Catheya picked him up while Vilari stayed behind. Catheya's vessel was completely different compared to Nala's. It screamed of luxury. It was either made from some sort of spiritual ice or a pristine crystal, and was covered in dense fractals. Obviously a leisure vessel and not something you'd use in battle or Mystic Realms.

Even then, its speed was over ten times greater than Nala's Low-quality vessel's, and the surroundings flashed by as they sailed on the Twilight Rivers. An hour later, they appeared on another plateau close to the Twilight Ocean, this one far more hectic than any one he'd visited before.

Hundreds of thousands moved as a stream toward the enormous auction house, and more and more kept appearing through the island's teleporters or flying vessels. With the upcoming trial, most were unsurprisingly E-grade. Zac could spot hundreds of Hegemons flying toward their own entrance as well.

Zac wasn't surprised about that, considering this was a High-grade event. He was more surprised about the hundreds of people who lit up the surroundings with their undeniable life force.

“The living come here?” Zac exclaimed. “They don’t have their own auctions?”

“Well, they do.” Catheya shrugged. “Some items are useful for both the living and the undead. Besides, in a place like this, there are quite a few cultivators who walk the many paths of Death. Might as well join the empire if you plan on going down that road, if you ask me, though most seem reluctant to truly awaken.”

“What’s the point of cultivation if you lose your sense of self,” Zac muttered. “That might even be scarier than death to them.”

“Perhaps,” Catheya said with a lazy voice, clearly not very interested in the living necromancers or other death-attuned cultivators. She turned to Zac with inquisitive eyes. “What are you looking for in this place? You’ve already bought everything from pills to armor, enough to form a whole D-grade force. What else is there for you to buy?”

“Who knows. Some for me, some for the followers I’ve raised,” Zac said.

“Well, nothing beats the followers you’ve awakened yourself,” Catheya agreed. “But why haven’t you visited the Helman Bodyworks if you’re starting up a force?”

The place Catheya mentioned was a corpse store, dealing with both wholesale corpses and holding auctions for top-quality bodies.

“So far I’ve only awakened enemies I feel worthy to follow me,” Zac said.

“That’s stupid,” Catheya said as she flashed a token at a guard who let them inside the auction house. “You also need grunts to manage the minutiae. Buying a squad from a proper mortician saves you a lot of effort in cleansing and improving the bodies. Besides, in this place, the bodies won’t come with the... attachments, that might be problematic for you.”

“Why are you so helpful all of a sudden?” Zac asked with suspicion.

“Partly boredom.” Catheya shrugged. “I’ve been stuck cultivating for seven years since I left the Tower of Eternity.”

“Seven years?” Zac asked, his eyes flashing with realization. “You entered a Time Chamber after the Tower of Eternity?”

“Of course. The Twilight Ascent is a good opportunity, even for me. If I cultivated in real time, I would have reached the Late stages of Middle E-grade at best. This way I’ll be able to accomplish more.”

“But the Dao,” Zac said.

“I just spent one real-time year in the Time Chamber, and the other two in normal time,” Catheya explained. “It’s a worthy trade-off. Of course, in a perfect world, I’d have another decade or two to perfect my foundations and Dao before the event.”

Zac nodded in agreement. If he had the opportunity, he would have definitely wanted to do something similar. Losing one year of Dao meditation for four years’ worth of node-breaking was definitely a worthy trade if you were planning on entering a specific trial. It also explained why Catheya had gained so much power since they met last.

He almost thought she’d been provided with some divine treasure by her master. Turned out the truth was a lot more straightforward. Still, operating a Time Chamber for a whole year was definitely expensive and not something just anyone could afford. Diligently cultivating for four straight years was also extremely demanding of one’s mental strength. Zac somewhat saw Catheya in a different light.

The group was soon led to their seats by an attendant. It was a balcony overlooking a sea of participants and a grand stage in the distance. Being one of the lower balconies, powerful auras leaked from many of those in the top. All of them were from Hegemons as far as he could tell. Of course, it was likely there were Monarchs present, they just hid their energy.

“The first section will be aimed toward us,” Catheya explained as she produced a stick of expensive-looking incense. “Weapons, natural treasures, pills, High-grade talismans. Things that will be useful during the Twilight Ascent. The second section will be much shorter and mainly targets the big shots.”

“We won’t be thrown out for the second part, right?” Zac asked, wanting to see the kinds of treasures Monarchs might want for themselves.

“Of course not,” Catheya said. “But be careful bidding against those old monsters or you might find your soul crushed while walking the streets. I definitely won’t avenge you if you get yourself killed over a treasure.”

“Well, whatever,” Zac snorted at the laughing Catheya.

FLAUNTING ONE'S WEALTH

Zac wasn't offended by Catheya's disinterest in helping him if an auction-related conflict arose. Their relation was one of an employer-employee, where both used each other for benefits. Why should she stick her neck out? Zac definitely wouldn't do so if she got herself in similar trouble.

The auction started up, but Zac wasn't overly invested in the proceedings. If you'd seen one, you'd seen them all. He mostly enjoyed the incense as he swapped between chitchatting with Catheya and reading up on the treasures for sale.

A surprisingly large number of the wares were weapons and spell amplifiers, such as staves, wands, or censers, and some reached prices far beyond what Zac expected. Zac figured getting a perfect weapon was something you'd prioritize from the get-go rather than waiting until right before a trial.

There were quite a few pills, but they were barely any better than the Dawn series he already purchased. They still reached fairly impressive prices, as there were always some people who were ready to pay a premium to get the best of the best. Zac bought some pills and talismans to complement his stock, but he started to get bored after a few hours.

Until finally, something interesting appeared.

“Next we have unique recipe pill sets. There are five sets available today. Each set contains twenty-five pills, and we have tested their efficacy and can guarantee their

effectiveness. The anonymous Alchemist calls them **[Chainbreaking Pills]**, and they are a must-have for mortals and cultivators aiming to reach the Late E-grade in one piece. Their effect is simple; they loosen the resistance of cultivator nodes, resulting in a smaller backlash.

“These pills can save you time and allow you to gain levels without worry inside the Twilight Ascent. We’ll start bidding at twenty-five thousand E-grade Nexus Coins for the first set,” the announcer exclaimed.

A few cultivators down in the public section immediately bid, and the price rose by one thousand E-grade Nexus Coins one time after another. Zac definitely wanted these things, so he bid thirty-five thousand, raising the current price by six thousand E-grade Nexus Coins.

“Are you crazy? Why’d you want those kinds of pills?” Catheya asked, looking at Zac like he was an idiot. “You might as well inject yourself with toxic sludge.”

“What?” Zac asked with confusion.

“The kind of pills that weaken the node walls are essentially poison. They’re full of pill toxins. Look, not a single guest from the balconies is bidding. It’s just the wandering cultivators with more money than sense,” she explained. “Besides, their effect is almost negligible for the third-tier nodes in your head, the only place where it really matters.”

“More money than sense, I guess that’s me.” Zac smiled as he raised the bid to forty thousand E-grade Nexus Coins.

While pill toxins might be a problem for others, they certainly weren’t for him. It might force him to slow down his cultivation a few years to let his hidden node, **[Purity of the Void]**, cleanse the toxins, but it was completely different from wandering cultivators. They essentially had no method to get rid of the toxins at all.

It was ultimately a low-cost gamble. He would save some time by reducing the time it took to recover from breaking a node, and he’d lose some time to rid himself of the toxins. If

the benefits outweighed the disadvantages, then great. If not, he'd look for some other method to keep leveling without spending months in the sickbed from the backlash.

“How embarrassing.” Catheya sighed with a shake of her head. “The others know this balcony is mine. They'll think I've lost my mind.”

“What others?” Zac asked.

“Scions of various clans.”

“Who cares? Isn't it only good if they think you're an idiot?” Zac said as he raised the bid again to fifty-five thousand. “Makes them underestimate you.”

“Oh, so you're helping me now, are you?” Catheya chortled.

“Exactly.” Zac's mouth widened into a grin as he won the bidding.

Zac bought the third set as well, which meant he now had enough pills to reach level 150 if the pills actually worked. Two small boxes arrived to the private seating area a few minutes later, and Zac happily stashed them both away in front of Catheya, whose expression of distaste hadn't altered one bit.

“Wait, is it for your followers?” she asked, like she'd finally figured something out. “It has to be. A Draugr wouldn't put something like that into their body.”

“How do you know? Have you met all the Draugr in the world?”

“Well, whatever,” Catheya huffed. “Your funeral.”

Zac smiled and turned back to the auction. The next item he really wanted appeared twenty minutes later. The auctioneer started to sell off one Race-boosting item after another, and Zac eventually landed a withered branch holding three identical fruits called **[Fruit of Awakening]**. Zac chose them because while their effect was powerful, eating them supposedly felt like being ripped apart. Those with weaker constitutions could even die from ingesting them.

He was more than willing to exchange some discomfort for increased effect, and he gladly paid the 560,000 E-grade Nexus Coins for the trio. He already had a set of Pseudo D-grade pills that would do the trick, but those ultimately contained toxins. Even though Zac had his hidden node helping out, why waste its effect on unnecessary things?

Zac also bought a set of Pseudo D-grade leveling pills called [**Aethergate Pills**]. Their effect was supposedly 50% greater compared to the pills he already purchased. That extra efficiency raised their cost to almost one D-grade Nexus Coin each. It was definitely worth it. Others seemed to feel that way as well, which resulted in a heated bidding war.

Of course, there was a limit on how much people were willing to pay for a leveling pill when they could just take a normal pill and cultivate for a month or two inside a gathering array to make up the difference. As for Zac, he didn't have much of a choice. His foundations were almost absurdly heavy, and required more than ten times the energy for a single level compared to an average cultivator.

If he didn't use the best of the best, he might reach the point of immunity before he made any significant gains.

Cathey eventually got into the spirit of things, though Zac could tell her financial situation wasn't as good as his. She immediately stopped when prices reached 20% over the expected price, meaning she either didn't have the capital or willingness to overspend, even when the Twilight Ascent was right around the corner.

Zac couldn't help asking. "If you need the items, why don't you just overpay a bit? Some of the items you bid on only rose by 30% or so."

"Do you think everyone is like you?" Cathey said with a scrunched-up face. "My cultivation resources are mostly provided by the clan and my master, but my standard allowance is just ten D-grade Nexus Coins a year. I have less than three hundred coins on me. And that's considered pretty good. I don't understand what your master was thinking

showering you in wealth like that. It usually does more harm than good, making you reliant on it.”

Zac rolled his eyes, though it wasn't really evident with his pitch-black orbs for eyes. Only ten D-grade Nexus Coins a year? That was 10 trillion Nexus Coins, a fortune that would eclipse some D-grade clans back in the Zecia Sector. And Zac bet if she really needed the money, it wasn't like her master would hold out on her.

“Maybe if the items were for myself and I really needed them,” Catheya added. “But the things I bid on were ultimately for followers. I have budgets I need to follow since I have hundreds of them back home. Besides, my people are all capable. They have their own money. And if not, they can go complete some tasks for remuneration.”

“I guess you're right,” Zac said.

It was a good reminder. While he'd only spent a fraction of the wealth Leandra provided him, he wouldn't be able to keep going like this. Currently, he was spending without having any real income. It'd take millennia to make up what he spent over the past week with Port Atwood's current state of operations.

Zac being a mortal also meant he essentially had to fight fate with wealth. Where others could just cultivate, he had to risk his life and use treasures. He couldn't keep using half his money on his followers. They'd have to rely on their own capabilities on the road of cultivation. It was the same with most clans. After some basic welfare, the members had to fend for themselves.

A clan simply couldn't stomach the cost of Peak cultivation resources, not even for their greater talents, and there was no reason to do so. Even the greatest geniuses usually found themselves stuck at one bottleneck or another, often before they reached a level where they could actually contribute to the clan.

Meanwhile, hundreds of generations came and went for the Monarchs at the top. It was more cost-effective to breed descendants since reaching the top usually required a series of unlikely encounters rather than wealth.

The auction kept going for a full eight hours until things stilled. Zac hadn't made any big moves after getting the things he needed, except buying a few raw materials with strong death-attuned or corrosive effects. He felt they were promising for **[Love's Bond]**, in case his problem was based on the feeding procedure rather than the materials.

He also managed to get his hands on five E-grade Dao Treasures, though none of them were of any impressive quality. Even then, the bidding had been extremely intense, with people on the balconies jumping in. They ended up costing Zac over twenty D-grade Nexus Coins a pop, while the greatest ones put up for auction surpassed five hundred D-grade Nexus Coins.

Dao Treasures normally weren't anywhere near this expensive. Catheya believed it was because of the Twilight Ascent. If Catheya was aware the trial would be based on the Dao, then so did hundreds of other factions. Zac wouldn't be surprised if Catheya had been provided with a set of Dao Treasures beforehand, meant to go together with the **[Life-Death Pearls]**.

Zac was a bit tempted to buy up every single Dao Treasure. Except, judging by the frantic bidding and Catheya's warnings, he'd probably get himself killed if he did something like that. Besides, Dao Treasures were meant mostly as fuel for him nowadays, not something he wanted to dictate his direction of cultivation. It was a bit of a flaw in his old cultivation, where part of his insights wasn't perfectly aligned with his current envisioned cultivation path.

He'd made great improvements in the beginning thanks to Dao Treasures and the Dao Funnel, but his Dao Seeds had contained all kinds of odd facets of his Daos that weren't necessarily useful. Now that he knew what direction he wanted to walk, he preferred to gain the insights on his own and incorporate them into his Fragments with the help of a Dao Treasure.

"The next section is starting soon," Catheya said as the first part ended. "Remember, the intended buyers now will be Hegemons and Monarchs. Be careful."

“I know, I know.”

Zac didn't care, as he was mostly staying behind to broaden his horizons.

The first item put up for sale was a natural treasure Zac had never heard of before. **[Eternal Flash]** was actually a lightning bolt suspended in time inside a purple crystal. The treasure's effects were as impressive as it looked. **[Eternal Flash]** could both improve the affinity to the Dao of Lightning while also having a good chance of opening lightning-attuned hidden nodes.

It was an extremely good item and made Zac a lot more excited about the rest of the auction. However, he was a bit confused why an item like **[Eternal Flash]** appeared here rather than as one of the ultimate treasures in the first part of the auction.

“Didn't you say the intended buyers were Hegemons?” Zac asked.

“What E-grade cultivators can afford treasures like these, except you? Something like this will go for over a thousand D-grade Nexus Coins,” Catheya said with a pointed look. “It's still marketed for big shots. If they have a particularly talented descendant or disciple, they might buy it as a gamble that'll provide returns in the future.”

The item unsurprisingly went to someone in one of the top levels for the price of fifteen thousand D-grade Nexus Coins, and one amazing item after another appeared. Zac was starting to notice a pattern.

“There are no treasures useful for Life or Death cultivators in a place like this?” Zac muttered with surprise.

“Those kinds of treasures definitely exist. There are plenty of treasures like that in the depths of the Twilight Ocean, from what I hear,” Catheya muttered. “But those treasures won't reach a public auction this close to the Twilight Ascent. The big shots have already snatched them up. Remember, every time you bid in this place, you might make an enemy of a Hegemon or even a Monarch.”

Zac nodded. He'd been careful to avoid bidding against any powerful-looking cultivators for this very reason. However, Catheya's warnings were slowly relegated to the back of his mind when a radiant treasure appeared on the stage.

"Next is an extremely rare item retrieved when the Radiant Temple discovered an unclaimed Ancient Realm two hundred thousand years ago. It was lost in the Twilight Ocean fifty thousand years later and just recently rediscovered," the auctioneer exclaimed. "It is called the **[Stone of Hope]**. It is a one-of-a-kind accessory with a unique natural treasure as its core, further perfected by a natural formation."

Zac looked on with interest, as this was the first time he'd seen a treasure coming out of an Ancient Realm. After all, those places didn't even exist in the frontier sectors, from what Zac gathered. It was the same with Catheya. She leaned slightly forward in the chair with interest.

"Its effect is simple yet marvelous. It protects your fate while cultivating, reducing the risk of powerful backlashes. Its main use was to provide help for mortals on the road of cultivation, lessening the dangers of breaking open nodes. It is even effective when forcing open the final nodes, drastically reducing the risk of death," the announcer said. "This tool can help your less fortunate descendants walk further on the road of cultivation, perhaps even reaching Hegemony and gaining millennia of longevity."

Catheya sighed in disappointment as she leaned back in her chair. Zac's reaction was definitely the opposite. This treasure was exactly what he was looking for. A far greater alternative to the nigh-useless **[Shedding Mortal Coil Array]** he was currently relying on when breaking through. With his massive foundations, he was already dreading the later stages of the E-grade. The recently acquired **[Chainbreaking Pills]** might be able to help out even though their effect seemed limited at the later stages, but this particular treasure would clearly help all the way.

"The bidding starts at five thousand D-grade Nexus Coins," the announcer said, making Catheya release an

expletive.

Zac could understand her disdain. Five thousand D-grade Nexus Coins to help push a mortal to Peak E-grade? That was beyond extravagant, and there was unsurprisingly not a single bid even after half a minute. For Zac's ears, the silence was beautiful music, and he bid the five thousand when no one stepped forward.

"Six thousand," an ethereal voice countered after a short pause.

"Seven thousand," Zac said without hesitation.

"Are you crazy?" Catheya wheezed, slapping Zac's arm. "That is the Veilplume Monarch. I hear her youngest son is a mortal. You'll bring a calamity on your head if you insist on taking this thing."

"Eight," the voice answered, and there was an unmistakable sharpness to the tone.

"I must have it," Zac said. "What level is this Monarch?"

"Early stage, I think, why?" Catheya asked with a frown.

"Your master can make her back down," Zac slowly said as he activated the bidding array.

"First explain why, and then we'll talk terms," Catheya said as she thoughtfully glanced at the upper balconies.

"A common friend of ours desperately needs this thing," Zac said.

"What? Who? Your attendant, the Soul Cultivator?" Catheya muttered. "No wait, don't tell me?"

"Zac Piker," Zac said. "Helping me is helping him, which in a sense is helping your ancestor."

"That crazy guy is a mortal!" Catheya almost screamed. "How is that possible?"

"Nine thousand," Zac said into the communication crystal instead of answering Catheya, seeing as the bidding had almost run out of time.

Zac shrugged upon seeing Catheya's glare, though he wasn't as calm as he let on. He was playing with fire continuing bidding before he'd secured protection. Hearing about the Veilplume Monarch's situation, she might consider his bidding for this item as a direct attempt at cutting the life of her child short.

"Ten thousand. Little brother, how about giving me some face and letting this one go? I will remember the favor," the Veilplume Monarch said.

The words were kind, but it felt like the temperature in the whole auction hall had dropped a few degrees. Zac might be in trouble considering that the auctioneer didn't even dare speak up. Normally they'd intercede in blatant attempts at suppressing the bidding.

Catheya looked at Zac for a few more seconds, each moment feeling like an eternity until she took out a communication crystal. She exchanged a few sentences, and Zac breathed out in relief when her furrowed brows relaxed.

"My master can deal with this," Catheya said, a smile spreading across her face. "But we will require something in return."

BUMPY RIDE

Zac's abyssal eyes moved back and forth between the necklace being presented on the scene—its core shimmering with mysterious lights that called to the very depths of his soul—and to the congenial smile of his companion, which seemed like a sword of Damocles over his head.

“What do you want?” Zac sighed, very likely making a deal with the devil.

“We don't need much. One request from each of us. I have a secondary mission in the Twilight Ocean, one that might put us in the crosshairs of some dangerous people among the living. I was planning on doing that with just my followers to help out, but I think things would go smoother with your help.”

“How long?” Zac asked with a frown.

“It will be completed by the time we reach the Life-Death Pearls, but there will probably be some heated battles.”

“I won't fight to the death,” Zac said without hesitation. Catheya's mouth only quirked up.

“Agreed, but you need to put in some real effort,” Catheya countered.

“And your master?” Zac asked as he glanced at the scene, catching the announcer staring at him. He waved at him to wait for a bit before he turned back to Catheya.

“He has a personal task for you. I don't know its contents, but he said it was simple enough,” she said.

Zac wasn't relishing the thought of "owing one" to a Peak C-grade Monarch... Did he have a choice? He and Kenzie had searched high and low for an item like the **[Stone of Hope]** all across the Zecia Sector over the past three years, but they hadn't even heard of an item that came close to this.

This was probably his only shot, since he'd return to Zecia after the Twilight Ascent.

"Agreed," Zac sighed as he activated the auction crystal just before the auctioneer was about to close on the item. "Fifteen thousand. I apologize to the esteemed Monarch, but I am adamant about getting this item."

A snort echoed through the whole venue, causing the room to vibrate ominously. But she didn't lash out or try to pressure him, leading Zac to believe Catheya's master had already interceded.

A few minutes passed, and Zac looked down at the intricate box in his hands with mixed emotions. Not even Catheya seemed unaffected by the amount of wealth its contents represented. Hopefully, the effect of the **[Stone of Hope]** was as great as it was proclaimed, since the Veilplume Monarch had only backed down after running up the price to forty thousand D-grade Nexus Coins.

According to Catheya, the Veilplume Monarch had already come to an agreement with her master. She just couldn't simply back down from an E-grade brat without punishing him a bit for his impudence. That was why Zac found himself overpaying by almost ten times what the treasure was normally worth. Of course, it was always hard to gauge the value of these kinds of once-in-a-lifetime treasures.

Suffice to say, an item that could only help up to the Peak E-grade definitely wasn't worth forty thousand D-grade Nexus Coins to most people or factions. A clan could nurture millions of warriors with that kind of wealth, and some of those people might reach Hegemony. To use it to help a mortal? Unthinkable. Even if it was infinitely reusable; which Zac very much doubted it was.

Of course, it was another story if the recipient bought the item for himself. Zac would have paid over one hundred thousand D-grade Nexus Coins for something that would allow him to safely make his way through the High E-grade, where node-breaking was synonymous with suicide for someone with as powerful a foundation as him.

The intense bidding had caused ripples among the spectators, and soon the auction continued again. It was a real eye-opener. Zac looked on as one amazing item after another appeared on the stage. A few of them were even at the level of the **[Eye of Har'Theriam]** he'd gotten from Yrial, and they caused multiple Monarchs to fiercely bid for them.

However, other items didn't get a single bid, and the auctioneer eventually took them away. One of the items that garnered such a tepid reception was a natural treasure that looked a bit like a heart wrought from dark-green crystal. It was completely still, yet Zac's senses were tricked to think it was somehow beating.

The **[Cardinal Kernel]**, a powerful bloodline treasure that was reputed to be effective in evolving, and to a small degree, purifying bloodlines. Its price tag was somewhat shocking for an E-grade bloodline-boosting treasure: 2,500 D-grade Nexus Coins. It was just a fraction of the price of his **[Stone of Hope]**, but similar items had been sold during the first half where the price tag was set in E-grade Nexus Coins.

"What's going on? Why is no one buying this thing?" Zac asked about the crystalline heart. "It's expensive, but its efficacy is extremely high."

"It's definitely a good item, though a bit overpriced." Catheya nodded. "I guess a large part of the price comes from the excessive rarity. I've never heard of this thing before. I guess none of the old masters here feel it's worth the investment. Besides, far from all bloodlines provide direct combat capabilities that would help in the trial."

"Still, it shouldn't be too much money for a Monarch," Zac said.

“Well, not really, but you have to look at it from their perspective. The kind of treasures they need might require them to scrounge and risk their lives for tens of thousands of years. Just maintaining their inner worlds and keeping them from shrinking is a constant drain on their resources, to the point of bankruptcy for some. And new generations in their clans appear every thousand years. Why would they spend their hard-earned money on their eighty-sixth-generation grandson they might not even have met?” Catheya said.

“If they did that for a few talents every generation, they’d ruin their own cultivation,” she continued. “They’d only purchase an item like this for a direct disciple they have really high hopes for, and if it would provide huge benefits. I guess there’s no one here who both has a disciple that needs the item and who can properly extract enough value for it.”

“Basically, I could buy this thing without drawing anyone’s ire?” Zac asked with gleaming eyes.

“Sure, I guess. But possessing too much wealth can be seen as a sin. And I’m not sure it will work on our Draugr bloodline,” Catheya said with a shake of her head. “Or do you have some odd mutation? Perhaps for our friend again?”

That comment revealed something interesting Zac already suspected: that Draugr all had a common bloodline. However, he was more focused on whether he should go for it. Twenty-five hundred D-grade Nexus Coins was just a fraction of his wealth, but it might put him in the crosshairs of greedy opportunists.

Catheya’s master had only agreed to defend him against the Veilplume Monarch, not against the billions of greedy people in Twilight Harbor.

His bloodline was only F-grade, and he hadn’t made any real progress over the past three years. His bloodline method, **[Bloodline Resonance]**, only allowed him to gain basic control over his bloodline talent and did nothing to actually improve it. The Shard of Creation had helped him make some improvements to the storage capacity of **[Force of the Void]**.

However, Zac wasn't sure if his actual bloodline was making any progress. Eating half a mountain was how he'd awakened the bloodline, so Zac was pretty confident eating some more would keep progressing it. The **[Cardinal Kernel]** might not be enough to evolve the bloodline in one go, but it would be a first step in the right direction. Risk and reward... Zac struggled with the two as the auctioneer desperately tried to get someone to buy the thing.

No one was interested. The auctioneer gave up and turned toward an assistant to take the item away, forcing Zac to make a decision.

"Twenty-five hundred, I'll take it," Zac said as he placed his bid.

He'd already flaunted his wealth. Might as well snatch a few more items and hide under Catheya's protective umbrella on the way back, as long as it didn't directly garner him any new enemies.

Unfortunately, most of the items that would be useful to Zac were useful to others as well, and the bloodline item was the only one he managed to buy. The items put up for auction switched from treasures meant for juniors to items meant for the big shots themselves. The true part of the second half of the auction.

Zac wasn't planning on buying anything here, but he did encounter an interesting item early on. It was a frozen organ that had fallen out of a spatial tear. It contained some spatial fluctuations along with other chaotic energies in the mix. There wasn't any real interest in this Peak D-grade body part among the cultivators, though Zac's eyes lit up.

It was definitely a piece from a High-grade void beast. One perhaps as powerful as the Collector itself. It was just a piece of an organ as large as a steel drum, so it wouldn't hold a Beast Core. Yet the energy it contained was much greater compared to the Beast Cores he'd extracted from the smaller void beasts.

Those cores were still the best resource he had for quickly restoring his **[Force of the Void]** and nurturing the **[Void**

Heart]. Zac spent one thousand D-grade Nexus Coins to buy the thing, while Catheya's face twisted into a growing infamy of 'you're a fool.' It might be useful to help evolve his hidden node or at least serve as a source to rapidly fill up his reserves while inside the Mystic Realm.

The final items appeared, and Zac was surprised to see the top item was a piece of bark with markings on it. It was certainly something good since he got a splitting headache just from looking at the runes, but he was shocked to hear the frantic bidding. It eventually went for the obscene price of 18,300 C-grade Nexus Coins, a stark reminder that he was just a financial paper tiger.

The bombastic ending closed the auction on a high note, and heated discussions spread through the hall as people started to leave.

"Alright, let's go back?" Zac asked as he saw people streaming out of the enormous hall.

"Are you crazy?" Catheya laughed. "I'm not letting you onto my vessel. Who am I, your Dao Guard? Sort out this mess yourself."

"What the hell?" Zac said with a mix of exasperation and worry, realizing his plan of hiding behind her skirt had long been exposed.

"I told you to be careful, but you had to spend enough to make a Late-stage Hegemon green with envy," Catheya said with a roll of her eyes.

"Didn't we have a deal? Protection for favors?" Zac ventured.

"Master made the Veilplume Monarch back down, and she won't act against you during your stay. But there are other people out there, no?" Catheya explained.

"Well, shit," Zac muttered. "Can you ask your master for me?"

"He said strength is required to hold onto your treasures. Prove yourself worthy." Catheya grinned.

The adrenaline rush of his reckless spending was fast wearing off; his face sicklied over with the pale cast of thought. Of course, every purchase was for something he needed, the necklace in particular. Except his Spatial Ring had turned into a hot potato, and he even had some thoughts of telling Vilari to return home as he activated his escape bracelet.

He'd gotten his hands on everything he needed to purchase already, so leaving now wouldn't be the worst thing in the world. Still, Catheya didn't seem too worried, and her master appeared to need his assistance with something. Perhaps he was overthinking things.

"Any recommendations?" Zac probed.

"Well, you'll be safe in your courtyard. Our clan is guaranteeing the safety of all guests, and there is a Monarch standing guard over the whole disk. People also know my master is around." Catheya took out a miniature vessel that looked a lot like a small luxurious skipper. "I'll lend you a spare vessel."

"Thank you, I guess," Zac sighed.

"Don't look so glum," Catheya laughed. "This is just a precaution. You're still Draugr; only a fool would dare attack you."

"Thanks for putting up the flags," Zac grunted, which earned him a confused look in return.

Zac's stature started to shrink the next moment, and he soon had a short but bulky build where his right arm was almost twice as thick as his left. His back also became hunched over, and when Zac put on a grotesque mask he'd earlier prepared, the transformation was complete.

"Not bad." Catheya nodded appreciatively. "Well, have fun."

She walked out of the room, blending in with the crowd. Zac waited another minute before he shuffled out, and jumped on the lent vessel and flew away.

His eyes were peeled in every direction, forcibly shuttling off at a pace that wouldn't raise any brows. He reached the area meant to take off without causing any waves, and he soon left the venue among thousands of different vessels shuttling to-and-fro. He kept vigil over the closest vessels, and was relieved to see them doing the same.

He already knew these auctions sometimes turned into bloody affairs this close to a Twilight Ascent. There was no difference between risking your life here and inside the Twilight Ocean for a chance to be reborn for some people. Plus, everyone was on edge. Nothing happened for a full hour, but that didn't lessen Zac's worries. He'd reached the vast space between two plateaus, and the risk for attack here was the highest.

Some things couldn't be avoided.

Zac sensed killing intent heading his way. He turned over to see a group of five Late E-grade cultivators who'd jumped off a neighboring vessel, heading straight for him. Had he been exposed or was it because his vessel looked expensive?

Four sinister chains shot out with almost blinding speed. Two of which were wrapped around a cultivator each before the attackers had a chance to react. Another of the chains punched straight through a Corpse-lord's chest, instantly turning him into a grisly ornament to Zac's weapon. Only one managed to activate a movement skill in time to dodge, but the chain was unrelenting.

Zac had already taken out a spare shield, and he almost instantly grew to five meters as he activated his Peak-mastery **[Vanguard of Undeath]**. There were still two free cultivators, one of whom was clearly a Dexterity-based assassin, while the other was a straightforward warrior. It was the assassin who kept dodging the chain, until he found himself right in front of Zac.

The massive bardiche was already next to the assassin's throat, and a sinister black swirl caused it to emit a terrifying aura. The assassin tried to flash away, but it was much too late. He was within Zac's domain now. His head was lopped clean

off, and a torrent of black ichor turned into a frozen flower as it fell into the Twilight River.

Some of the ichor didn't actually float out into the emptiness of space, but rather entered the black swirl, causing its aura to increase to even greater heights. Zac didn't pause to celebrate the kill, shooting toward the free-running warrior. The man realized his group had hit an iron plate and wanted to escape, but he looked around in confusion as he was rooted in place while trying to flee through the Void.

This was one of the benefits of pushing [**Vanguard of Undeath**] to Peak mastery. Its taunting effect was effective even at this stage, though it only lasted a second or two before most could overcome it. That was enough for Zac to catch up, and a five-meter jagged scar of pitch-black ichor hacked into the warrior's defensive barrier, instantly cutting it in two.

Another hack with [**Gorehew**] ended the man's life, and the last two attackers were firmly caught. One locked into a morbid embrace with their impaled companion. Zac was pleasantly surprised by his new skill. It wasn't fancy and didn't have a lot of functions, but it could fully scale with his attributes, and its edge was extremely sharp.

Besides, the skill had already grown another meter in length after the second kill, indicating the jagged edge could become a real terror in the middle of a packed horde of enemies.

"Please!" one of the two captives cried as Zac dragged the captives toward him. Zac released a sinister chuckle from behind his mask as his grotesquely oversized right arm cut her and her companion in two, ending the fight.

It'd taken less than three seconds since Zac shot out his chains, and all five attackers were dead. Their body parts joined the Twilight River one by one as Zac jumped back onto his vessel and sailed away as though nothing had happened, confident that his disguise hadn't been broken. However, Zac didn't feel any relief, even when the neighboring vessels gave a slightly wider berth to his own.

His trip home was bound to become a bumpy one.

OPPRESSIVE MIGHT

Ruthlessly ripping apart the group of opportunists had given Zac a breather. But it would take over four hours to return, even when using the Twilight River for a speed boost and spatial manipulation. There were also multiple plateaus he needed to pass, and each one might have cultivators lying in wait.

Nothing happened for fifteen minutes after the initial attack, but a sudden and massive explosion in the distance drew everyone's attention. It was far into the void between the platforms—a tremendous eruption of a mix of death and fire. Judging by the force, it definitely wasn't a struggle between E-grade cultivators, but rather proper Hegemons. Even if it was just an array or talisman going off, something of that magnitude had to be powered by a D-grade Cultivator's Core.

A scream of danger made Zac's hair stand on end, and he barely had a chance to send an activation to a defensive talisman and turn **[Love's Bond]** into a shield. A thick barrier sprang up around him, and it immediately dimmed as some sort of black haze glommed onto it. Someone had used an Array Breaker to counter his talisman, but the slight delay allowed him to maneuver his shield just enough to block out an extremely penetrative spear stab that crashed through the weakened shield.

Zac was thrown off his vessel by the condensed force, and he soared almost a hundred meters into the Void. He was completely fine from the strike, but others weren't quite as lucky. The enormous explosion grabbed everyone's attention

to some degree, and over twenty parties had taken the chance to launch attacks on neighboring vessels.

Battles were raging for a stretch of thousands of meters on the Twilight River, with all kinds of powerful energy outbursts. Apart from the enormous battle that raged in the Void, it looked like all the combats were between E-grade cultivators. He hadn't heard anything, but was it possible that Hegemons were hesitant to fight close to the rivers?

A battle between D-grade cultivators might damage the rivers themselves, which could have huge implications. They essentially were the lifeblood of the whole Twilight Harbor. If that was the case, then Zac definitely didn't want to stay too far away from the river. He expelled some Miasma to counteract the slight gravitational pull from the closest plateau, his eyes sweeping in every direction, trying to find any hint of his attacker.

The man was simply gone.

Had he realized Zac was too hard a nut to crack and targeted someone else? Or was he still lying in wait? Zac couldn't tell for sure, but he activated another defensive talisman as he made his way back to his boat before it was dragged away by the Twilight River.

Zac's nerves were taut as he stepped back aboard the vessel, but he somewhat relaxed when he sensed the familiar aura of the spearman a few boats over, locked in battle with what looked to be a poison master. He briefly considered joining the fray to get some revenge, but he didn't want to bring any trouble down on his head.

He threw out a couple of Peak E-grade talismans, turning his flying treasure into a small fortress. He'd avoided doing so until now out of fear that it would cause more harm than good by drawing attention to himself, but a number of vessels had already done the same after seeing how chaotic the river had become.

Another enormous explosion erupted in the distance, and Zac vaguely saw an obscured figure fly toward the closest plateau with a speed that far surpassed anything possible in the

E-grade. As expected, the chaos caused another wave of carnage, but Zac and his layers of defenses weren't one of the targets this time. Hopefully, that meant his identity was safe.

Things calmed down over the next two hours, though Zac did have to fend off two more attacks before he was left alone. None managed to push Zac to the point he had to display any of his hidden cards. The battle left the flying vessel somewhat in tatters, but Zac didn't really care.

He had a feeling Catheya had given him this opulent thing just to cause some trouble, and he was more than happy to see it fall apart as a small act of revenge. In fact, the more he thought about it, the more he felt Catheya orchestrated this whole situation to some degree. Probably in an attempt to extract more secrets from him. Perhaps she was somewhere close, observing him while laughing at his struggles.

Zac and the surviving members eventually reached a hub where six different rivers converged, and the traffic returned to normal as the auction-goers split up and took whatever river led to their own platform. Over 90% took two rivers that would pass by one of the largest plateaus, Hanging Twilight.

It was one of the world disks controlled by a number of local clans, and was also among the most popular places to stay for wandering cultivators and guests. Since over fifty of the strongest clans lived on the island, it wasn't really surprising that so many were going that way. Zac wasn't one of them though, and he continued toward the plateau controlled by Clan Sharva'Zi and a few other factions.

Suddenly, he found himself traversing the Twilight River all alone after hours of being surrounded by others. A peace that did nothing to let him relax at all. If anything, his unease grew sailing farther and farther away from the group. His flying vessel flew as quickly as possible. There was nothing out of the ordinary, and zero means for an E-grade assassin in hiding to keep up with his speed for so long.

Zac should be safe, but he sensed a threat to his life.

It was extremely muted, but Zac had long learned to trust his instincts. He let Miasma churn through his body for a few

seconds before he took out one of his Common escape talismans. The action confirmed his suspicions as a figure radiating an immense killing intent appeared just a few hundred meters away. Zac wasn't surprised to find his talisman blocked from activating.

There was no hesitation as Zac instantly activated his new movement skill with the help of **[Force of the Void]**, as anyone who could seal space was far more powerful than he. There was only endless darkness that contained a very familiar feeling. The very same ancient aura that marred any skill he activated with his bloodline talent.

He was only stuck in that endless Void for an instant before he was returned to reality, or at least Zac thought so. Everything was awash in monochrome, and it felt like time had slowed to a crawl. The river itself appeared almost frozen in time. Zac was more worried about the radiant beacon of intense deathly energies making its way toward the vessel he floated on in his intangible form.

It was obviously not some source of light, but rather an immensely powerful cultivator who lit up his surroundings with the immense powers hidden in his body. Zac was still unable to properly gauge Hegemons, but he guessed the attacker was at least a Middle Hegemon. There were no two ways about it. He'd been exposed by this person. Why else would someone like this target an E-grade cultivator?

Zac hadn't seen the attacker at all until he forced him to make a move. Now it was impossible to miss him. Zac guessed it was another advantage of his new skill, though he worried more about escaping. He flew off his vessel, making a beeline toward the closest continental disk. Reaching that place wouldn't guarantee his safety, but it was a lot better than being in the middle of the Void.

He was like a gust of smoke as he shot through the Void, neither bound by gravity nor the lack thereof. He was propelled by an immense expenditure of Miasma; an invisible comet rippling through space.

The Hegemon maintained his course, and his hand turned into a hundred-meter-wide claw that snatched up the whole vessel. The defensive talismans Zac left behind were instantly crushed along with the ship itself. The attack seemed somewhat slow from Zac's vantage, but that was an illusion of sorts. His perception of time was completely off in his current form. Only less than half a second had passed since the Hegemon appeared, even though it felt more like ten seconds.

If he hadn't used his bloodline talent to activate the skill, he would have been turned to mush. Thanks to his cheat, he was alive, and Zac desperately flew farther and farther away from the attacker. However, his heart sank when a ripple passed through his intangible form. Zac turned his "eyes," or whatever he was currently using to see, toward the Twilight River, and saw the Hegemon looked right in his direction.

A moment later, the assailant set out, aiming straight for Zac, who kept moving as quickly as his new movement skill would allow. He'd already moved thousands of meters at the expenditure of a huge amount of Miasma, but it wasn't enough against someone a whole grade above him. The cultivator was shortening the distance between them without breaking a sweat. Zac saw no recourse but to give up on escaping with **[Abyssal Phase]**.

He turned back into his real form, and desperately activated one of the ace talismans he'd prepared, forcibly moving him a thousand meters even though the spatial lock was in place. That was only delaying the inevitable though, and Zac ripped off his mask, turning back into the form of Arcaz Black.

"Halt! I'm a Draugr of the empire!" Zac roared as he stealthily gathered the force of Annihilation in his body.

Part of him hoped Catheya's master would come to his rescue, but he ultimately couldn't rely on something like that for his survival. No matter if some truths about him were exposed, he would have to go all out here.

The attacker was clearly undead, and his race would hopefully give him pause long enough to charge an

Annihilation Sphere. That was the only thing that would get him out of this situation. Zac saw his opportunity when the undead really did pause. He got a clear look at his enemy, a Corpselord mainly consisting of bestial parts.

Zac didn't recognize him at all from the auction, and he guessed that he'd visited with the explicit purpose of robbing bidders. Perhaps he hadn't even realized that Zac was a Draugr. Most people should know it since the balcony belonged to Clan Sharva'Zi, but there were quite a few temporary visitors in the area.

In either case, the truth was unclear, but his short hesitation did give him some breathing room. Unfortunately, not enough, as the Corpselord made his decision and shot forward, using a speed so fast, Zac could barely see him.

The world froze as a spear of ice vertically split the universe in half.

One moment there was nothing, the next a frigid lance stretched for hundreds of thousands of meters in front of Zac. Like a bolt of lightning frozen into ice. It was unfathomably long, but only a few dozen meters thick. The size of the attack was not the only shocking thing about it, and Zac was more mesmerized by the runes covering its surface.

Those runes might very well hold all the secrets to the chill of the night, of the frozen tundra and the cold of the void itself. It was endless and unfathomable. The runes had completely mesmerized him, and Zac realized too late he had lost his opportunity to escape. His whole body was immobilized by the endless chill.

Even a massive section of the Twilight River in the distance had turned to ice, and space itself was rendered frozen in place around the enormous bolt. A pervasive, soul-chilling cold rapidly seeped into his bones. Nothing he did had the slightest effect on curtailing the creeping death, finding himself helplessly staring into the horrified face of the Corpselord.

If Zac was in a bad situation, then it was obviously worse for his attacker. He'd been swallowed whole by the ice spear,

and his body was rapidly disappearing, freezing to the point that he became purified ice. Soon enough, it was just a head stuck in a visage of fear and pain. And then he was gone.

Zac's vision clouded over a second later, but the cold left of its own accord even when he found himself surrounded by a blizzard that completely blocked his sight of the surroundings. A gust of wind caused the snowfall to congeal into what looked like a five-meter avatar, and Zac heard a voice in his head.

“This assassin acted in hopes of pleasing the Veilplume Monarch, and he was adequately punished,” the voice said. “As for your part of the bargain...”

A yellow sphere as large as a basketball appeared in front of him, and Zac's scalp prickled. He had no idea what it was, but it felt even more terrifying than an atomic bomb.

“Put it into your Spatial Ring,” the avatar said, and Zac reluctantly complied.

The moment he touched the thing to stow it away, a small brand appeared on his hand.

“Drop this egg into the Twilight Chasm. Never take it out before you reach that place or the brand will kill you. Take off your Spatial Ring and it will kill you. Ignore the mission and you will die in three years,” the voice continued, and then the surroundings returned to normal.

Only a final warning echoed in his mind as Zac looked around in fear. “Do not tell my disciple about the details of this mission or the brand will kill you.”

Zac looked down at the blue mark on his hand as it faded away. He was deep in it now. The Twilight Chasm was in the absolute deepest part of the Twilight Ocean. The place where only the most powerful people could reach. The pressure from the immense Twilight Energy would kill most men in a heartbeat.

He didn't even get a chance to react to the shocking events before a large rune appeared a few hundred meters away, after which a dozen warriors stepped out. Zac's first reaction was to

flee, but he calmed down upon seeing their robes. It was an enforcement squad directly under the Twilight Lord, which explained why they could appear in this remote sector so easily.

“Young master, may I ask what transpired here?” the Revenant captain asked as the human fearfully looked around.

“I was attacked by a Hegemon on my way back from the auction,” Zac sighed. “My Dao Guard had to step forward.”

That was obviously bullshit, but it was simpler this way than telling the truth. As for the guards, there was no way to tell. They’d probably been sent here to see which Monarch had made a move, and when they saw he was a pureblood Draugr, they wouldn’t want to get too involved.

“I see,” the guard captain nodded. “Does young master require any assistance?”

“He’s dead now.” Zac shrugged. “But he destroyed my vessel and I don’t have a spare. Can you send me to my residence?”

“Certainly,” the Revenant quickly nodded as he took out a large flying treasure.

Zac jumped onto the vessel as the living members of the City Guard flew away. The Revenant captain wasted no time as he set out toward the hotel, with his soldiers acting as private guards to Zac, forming a War Array around him. This was obviously just some grandstanding considering there was a hidden Monarch guarding Zac, for all they knew. Zac believed they definitely couldn’t let a pureblood Draugr get attacked twice in short order without getting in trouble.

As they closed in on the hotel, Zac went over the series of events, trying to discern whether he’d exposed any large secrets. Thankfully, he believed he hadn’t made any big mistakes. There were no special hints from using **[Force of the Void]**, but he had rotated his Miasma for a while to hide the truth of his bloodline talent.

He might have leaked out some aura of Annihilation, but Catheya’s master shouldn’t be too surprised even if he had

sensed it. Vilari bore those marks on her face, and he'd released terrifying amounts of Annihilation during his rampage in Base Town. For all Catheya knew, all of them were connected to the Dao of Oblivion through Be'Zi.

As for everything else, Zac would have to go over it later. First and foremost, how was he supposed to survive going to the most dangerous place in the Twilight Ocean?

BREAKING SHACKLES

Getting stuck with such a deadly mission was a shock, but it wasn't like Zac hadn't thought of heading over to the Twilight Chasm before. After all, it was the endpoint of the Twilight Ocean, the spot where the greatest treasures could be found.

The Twilight Ocean was essentially an enormous planet where you started on a continent on one pole, while the Twilight Chasm was on the other end. The description wasn't exactly true though, as the realm itself was layered in ways Zac couldn't understand. It was possible to enter a stream that shot through the ocean, and find yourself on what should be the opposite side of the Mystic Realm, saving months of travel time.

Finding the Twilight Chasm was easy, but only the best of the best could survive in that place. The Twilight Energy alone was enough to instantly corrode the souls of 99% of all participants. And that was just the start. There would also be extremely powerful Peak E-grade beasts patrolling the waters, and you also had to contend with the most powerful trial-takers. Zac had only planned on going if he felt confident about his survival.

Now he was essentially given what could be considered a suicide mission. Zac struggled to understand why Catheya's master would give him a task like this. His mother's array was supposed to hide any details of his cultivation, making him appear completely bland through some unknown means. Yet Catheya's master seemed to believe him able to reach the very

depths of the Mystic Realm, something that was most likely impossible even for his own disciple.

Zac doubted a Peak C-grade Monarch would be so roundabout if he simply wanted Zac dead. Perhaps he believed Zac would be able to resist the ambient energy long enough to at least reach the chasm, completing the task before he succumbed. Maybe he'd found something indicating an ability to exceed expectations inside the Twilight Ocean when previously scanning Zac. Had his desperate escape from the Hegemon been so impressive he felt Zac had what it took to reach the end? It was impossible to tell.

It was also suspicious that he didn't want his disciple to know what was going on. Was it just that he didn't want his disciple heading for the dangerous Twilight Chasm or was there more at play beneath the surface? Zac felt it was all related to the secondary mission Catheya mentioned, but he had absolutely no idea what that entailed.

Ultimately, he didn't have much choice but to follow through. The blue mark on his hand had already sunk into his body, and Zac could no longer sense it. He tried activating [**Spiritual Anchor**], but there were no signs of its whereabouts at all. An E-grade skill was simply too low grade to expose a Peak C-grade mark.

The good news was, he didn't immediately need to set out to the chasm, even though it felt pretty bad walking around with that ominous thing in his Spatial Ring. He could spend a year or two working on his cultivation inside the trial, and only then set out to the depths. He was already at the precipice of evolving his Fragment of the Axe, and when adding the Life-Death Pearls, he was slated for a huge power-up.

The enforcement squad eventually reached the platform and actually led Zac all the way to his courtyard just to be safe.

“We have been given a new order,” the Revenant said. “Two captains will be stationed outside your courtyard and will accompany young master up until the trial. Don't worry, we will not impede on your daily life.”

“Thank you,” Zac said. The guard captain sat down a hundred meters away from the gate, closing his eyes in meditation.

The VIP treatment might be because of Catheya’s master or it might just be protocol. The council probably didn’t want Monarchs running rampant in the harbor, and keeping the young elites out of trouble was a good way to help keep the peace. In either case, it would be a relief to have two Hegemons following as a deterrent. Otherwise, he’d be hard-pressed to go out again.

Unfortunately, it looked like the leisurely days of traveling around on Nala’s dingy vessel were over. He would have to let her go so as not to get her involved in his mess. He and Vilari were only temporary guests, but Nala would have to make do in this place even after he left.

“I don’t want to be disturbed for the rest of the week,” Zac said as he turned to an attendant who stood waiting by the gate to his courtyard.

“Certainly, young master.” The early E-grade Revenant quickly nodded. “If you have the need for any of our services, feel free to contact us through the communication array installed by the gate.”

“One thing,” Zac said after some thought. “Do you have any allies among the Dreamers, someone reliable who can complete a few errands on the life-attuned islands?”

“That’s...” the attendant said as he glanced at the guards, who still hadn’t left the area. “Security is quite strict around this time...”

“Oh, nothing like that,” Zac snorted. “I just need someone to make some purchases for me, but I don’t want to visit those life-attuned places myself. It has to be someone who has access to premier establishments.”

“I will ask my manager,” the assistant said, but his face indicated that this shouldn’t be a hard request to field.

“Good, have the person visit me in one week,” Zac said, and the Revenant bowed, closing the gates to his courtyard.

Zac activated the mansion's isolation arrays the moment he closed the doors. The arrays were of High-quality, as he didn't sense a single ripple of energy from his surroundings. He couldn't sense the Hegemon or his soldiers waiting outside either. While they were enough to shield his activities, he also erected a private array for his own peace of mind.

Of course, if someone like Catheya's master wanted to spy on him, there was probably not much he could do about it. Thankfully, he wasn't planning on doing anything he desperately needed to hide over the following days.

"What happened?" Vilari asked with worry when she saw Zac's harried form.

He had some shallow wounds, and his robes were tattered in various places, though the tears were fast mending. He'd long since upgraded the Tool Spirit robes he'd bought from Yrial, and with the help of the Gemlings back home, he managed to infuse a burgeoning intelligence in the Tool Spirit. It was still a far cry from Verun, but the change was a step in the right direction that might help evolve the robes to D-grade in the future.

He'd also unlocked the third skill of the robes; a transformation ability. It allowed him to turn the previously white robe into a black-and-silver cut that suited his Draugr persona far better. Its defensive properties were worse than his own body and his skills, Zac was aware that Yrial used these robes more for the aesthetic than its properties. You'd need a Peak-quality defensive Spirit Tool for its skills to be of any use to someone like Zac.

That changed at D-grade. Reaching D-grade meant gaining the ability to power your equipment with the vast energy stored in your Cultivator's Core. Only then could even normal defensive equipment produce effects strong enough to match that of proper skills. That was also another reason why it was so hard to kill Hegemons. Even the poorest of the bunch had scrounged up for at least one or two D-grade defensive items that could block powerful strikes.

“A few items appeared that I really needed at the auction,” Zac sighed as he waved away Vilari’s ministrations. “I drew too much attention and was attacked on the way here.”

“Should we return home?” Vilari asked.

“I can’t... Catheya’s master personally intervened and forced me into completing a mission inside the Twilight Ocean. I’ll die if I go back to Earth now.”

“That bolt of ice... Was that him?” Vilari asked, a bit of killing intent leaking out from her body.

“You sensed it?” Zac asked with surprise, considering how far away the battle had taken place.

“It was like the universe was cut in two... Monarchy...” she mumbled with a frown.

“We’ll get there sooner or later.” Zac smiled. “I’ll give him a good thrashing when I reach that point. For now, I need to enter seclusion for a bit.”

The auction had ended just four hours ago, and Zac couldn’t wait to start using the things he bought. The recent events only reinforced the fact that he needed to get stronger, and fast.

“I will wait outside,” Vilari said as Zac entered the basement, where a sealed cultivation chamber was built. “Let me know if I can do anything to help.”

Zac didn’t waste any time after the vault-like door closed behind him. He replaced the complimentary prayer mat with a Peak-quality mat he’d bought the other day, and lit three sticks of incense around it. The room became filled with an earthy herbal aroma, and Zac’s mind entered a state of tranquility as the waves in his soul sea noticeably stilled.

The sticks, [**Serenity Incense**], were among the cheaper items he prepared for today. Their effect wasn’t anything special except helping one keep a calm and steady mind, which could lessen the risk of mishaps during breakthroughs. He originally wasn’t planning on using them just for eating a bunch of pills and treasures, but he was still a bit shaken after

coming face-to-face with not only a Hegemon, but a Peak Monarch.

His frazzled mind was soothed by the aroma and the mat, and he took out the **[Stone of Hope]** and hung it around his neck next to **[Love's Bond]**. He didn't really feel anything different from equipping the item, except a slight cooling sensation. There was a brief information crystal provided with the purchase, saying he didn't need to do anything except keep it on his body for it to work. Zac wasn't sure whether it would help when eating treasures though, since it was designed to help when forcibly breaking open nodes.

The next thing Zac took out was one of the first things he'd bought at the auction: the three **[Fruit of Awakening]**. Zac pushed the first one into his mouth and swallowed after chewing a few times. Nothing happened at first, then suddenly a sharp pang of pain hit his gut. He hunched over with a grunt, but the prickling pain just increased in severity over the following minutes.

One moment it felt like he would soil his pants, the next like he would vomit as waves of warmth spread through his limbs. Meanwhile, his very pathways may well have been literally on fire. Zac didn't panic, knowing this would happen. His whole body was coming "alive," where largely ornamental organs regained their function.

The process lasted three hours, at which point the side effects started to ebb down. Zac was elated to see his pathways were a lot wider, but he still hadn't reached D-grade race. Zac simply walked into an adjoining bathroom and doused himself to get rid of some extremely pungent impurities before he returned to the room and swallowed his second fruit.

Another wave of awakening spread through his body, but the worst of the pain had already passed. More gunk squeezed out of his pores over the next two hours, that was about it. His pathways had grown a few percent wider again, yet he still hadn't evolved. Zac wasn't deterred and swallowed his third and last fruit.

If this wasn't enough, he'd start cramming pills down his throat, even if those things added impurities. The hours passed, and waves of warmth altered with pangs of cold. Zac wasn't able to tell if the last fruit would be enough, until he felt a deep thump in his chest as the unmoving sludge in his veins started to move.

It was his heartbeat, a real one. It wasn't his hidden node waking up or anything, but rather the final organ in his body activating. And as the black ichor started to move through his veins, so did his organs truly wake up. It was amazing and uncomfortable all at once, and he couldn't help looking down at his body.

As expected, there still wasn't any life force, even though he had a pulse and "blood" coursing through his veins. Life could really take any form in the Multiverse. It was no wonder most people considered the soul the true core of a life, where the body was just a vessel to contain it. Zac took another shower to remove the last of the gunk, after which he had mostly acclimatized to his new state of being.

Zac inspected his form, and admit he felt marvelous. Honestly more so than he did in his human form. Draugr really lived up to their reputation. Until now, his undead side had felt pretty much the same as his human, but that wasn't exactly true any longer.

His pathways were both thicker and sturdier in his Draugr form. A few revolutions indicated the speed at which he could move his Miasma was almost 30% greater than in his human form, which meant he would be 30% faster at activating skills.

Not only that, his skin was extremely durable. It was soft to the touch, and he couldn't pierce it with most of his weapons. It was like he'd gained a new layer of protection with his body alone, without the aid of skills like **[Innate Ward]**. Finally, his energy reserves were massive. Had his human side provided 1 unit of Cosmic Energy per attribute point, then his Draugr side provided 1.3 units of Miasma per point.

In other words, his energy pool was 30% larger than a normal human's or a normal Revenant's, from what Zac guessed. It might not really increase his direct combat potential, but it was still a shocking advantage over normal cultivators. It would allow him to activate far larger skills and last a lot longer in combat, and it drastically reduced the drawback of his new movement skill.

Humans were considered a pretty lowly race in the Multiverse, where their only advantage was their huge numbers. Until now, he hadn't really felt his human heritage to be a detriment, but it was clear more powerful races had all kinds of benefits that might not be immediately discernable from a Status Screen.

If this was the advantage after just reaching D-grade race, what about the higher stages? Would the difference just keep increasing over time?

Zac was a bit surprised, though. He'd already somewhat come to terms with the fact that Robert Atwood wasn't his biological father, and that Leandra had done some sort of extensive modification to his body. She said herself she was the one who implanted the Specialty Core in him, which accidentally got triggered by the Draugr samples the Corpse-lord general, Mhal, had used as a weapon.

So, why wasn't his human side any stronger?

Leandra even looked down on his undead half from the sounds of it. Yet it was far better suited for cultivation than his human side. The only apparent special point about his original state was that his survivability, recovery, and energy resistance were better than normal. But his attribute cap and his ability to gain attributes from Attribute Fruits were just at the level of a peak human.

There was no easy answer to that question with his mother being long gone, but it begged the question if there was some way for him to improve his human constitution. After all, this issue should be something all human factions had to deal with. Perhaps there were methods to improve one's base quality.

Perhaps he could form a life constitution to match his Draugr form.

Zac shook his head. That was all a question for later. For now, he had finally become a D-grade Draugr, which meant it was time for him to make another push forward. He took out another box with anticipation, and a small pill rested inside on a velvet bed. It was deep purple, with golden flakes swirling inside, and it emitted a dense fragrance that made his newly awakened body scream with hunger.

It was the **[Aethergate Pill]**, the third item he'd bought from the auction. Zac swallowed the first of the batch.

AETHERGATE

Zac had been worried until now that any pill he'd swallow would be insufficient to provide the energy needed to break open a Middle-stage node since his foundation made things ten times harder compared to the average cultivator. Thankfully, those fears were instantly dispelled after swallowing the **[Aethergate Pill]**.

The leveling pill was Pseudo D-grade and it showed, considering the shocking amount of energy it contained. It was like eating twenty of the pills he used back when he'd just evolved. The pill formed a cool swirling whirlpool in his body, except Zac felt a pang of pain despite the pill energy not being chaotic at all.

The pill was simply meant for Late E-grade elite cultivators. Those who needed a shocking amount of energy for each level. It was a bit foolhardy to eat them at level 101, but Zac knew his constitution could take it. The pill vortex rapidly shrank into a size no larger than a button, retaining the same amount of energy as before as it moved toward the next node.

It was located on his shoulder just like his last one, but on the left side. It was just a few centimeters away from the pathways of what formerly was **[Cyclic Strike]**. Zac looked on with rapt attention as the whirlpool burrowed into the node. There was another slight pain as the pill vortex gradually cleansed and empowered the node. The whirlpool acted as a motor that kick-started the slow swirl that already existed inside, while feeding it a boatload of energy.

After a few moments, Zac felt a snap as the node fully opened, and a radiating wave of pain spread out through his body as a small gash appeared on his back. He fully felt as though he'd been struck by lightning and his pathways had become a conduit. The feeling was all too familiar, the backlash of opening a node. It was just a shadow of the agony that had left him bedridden for months when reaching level 101, but still caused sweat to run down his forehead.

It was no wonder it took Catheya a years to enter the late stages of the E-grade, even when having a Peak Monarch to assist in the process. Zac would be able to keep going for a while, but any dreams of rushing straight through the Middle E-grade with his Pseudo D-grade pills were dashed the moment he saw the damage to his foundations.

The **[Stone of Hope]** didn't seem to help either. He'd hoped it would lessen the damage, but it was looking to be more of a fateward-type item that protected against deadly harm when cultivating. Opening a node with a pill was just the standard path of leveling and not something this odd treasure would assist with. **[Chainbreaking Pills]** might help, but the damage wasn't big enough to warrant the cost of using those things unless he was actually forcing the nodes open.

The good news was that the pill energy wasn't exhausted after opening a full node. It wanted to keep infusing the recently opened node with energy, but Zac pushed the vortex toward the next node instead. Meanwhile, **[Purity of the Void]** was already working on overdrive, steadily preventing at least some of the pill toxicity from settling into the depths of his cells.

The second node was slightly below his shoulder blade to the side, and opening it would definitely have punctured a lung if forced. Another wave of pain erupted through his body an hour later. Zac spat out black ichor and inspected his state. The physical damage was still nothing worth mentioning, but the intangible damage had superimposed on the first set of wounds, creating more harm than they would do on their own.

Zac pushed the pain away, as the **[Aethergate Pill]** still wasn't done. He urged it to set the foundations for breaking

open the third node before its energy was exhausted. The pill had absolutely exceeded his expectations, though so had the pain. Not even cultivators had it easy, it seemed. Zac took a ragged breath before he took out a Supreme-grade Miasma Crystal.

He also popped a top-quality healing pill, starting to absorb the huge amount of Miasma. The nodes were opened, but he hadn't gained the levels just yet. The healing pills wouldn't really work on the hidden damage to his foundations, but it would at least patch up the wounds.

There was also some damage to the pathways around his opened nodes, and Zac spent three hours redrawing them with the help of [**Spiritual Anchor**]. It took two full days to fill the two nodes, even when using the Supreme Miasma Crystals, which were so energy dense they caused Zac pain as they flooded through his pathways.

It was worth it. He wasn't in a rush this time, and this way he'd avoid accumulating any unnecessary pill toxins. When he'd eaten a bunch of pills after reaching E-grade, he'd used pills for the process, but that was because he was flying toward the Dead Zone. This time there was almost two months before the Twilight Ascent started.

If anything, he didn't want to leave the courtyard at all since there might be more thieves and assassins roaming about. After seeing how things progressed, he had Vilari send a command to delay the meeting with whichever living attendant the hotel could enlist before he continued the process.

One node after another was opened and then filled with Miasma over the next ten days. Unfortunately, it was like a wedge had been inserted into Zac's body, and every node being forced open added a hit of a sledgehammer to that wedge. Eventually, Zac was forced to stop lest the wedge crack him in two. The hidden damage he had accumulated by that point was pretty serious, though far from the debilitating effect of doing things like a mortal.

Zac knew that he was at the precipice of causing some real damage, but he should be fine as long as he took things easy until the Twilight Ascent started. After that, he would only have to wait for a few months before he could start another round of pill-popping. Thankfully, while the accumulated damage had reached his limits, neither had the pill toxicity or his immunity.

It felt a bit bad to stop prematurely, but the gains were quite substantial. In fact, they were even better than what Zac expected considering he'd already reached Middle E-grade. Zac opened up his Status Screen, and a smile spread across his face when he saw the result.

Name: Zachary Atwood

Level: 109

Class: [E-Epic] Fetters of Desolation

Race: [D] Draugr – Void Emperor (Corrupted)

Alignment: [Earth] Port Atwood – Planetary Lord

Titles: [...] Peak Power, Monarch-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: 5,008 [Increase: 105%. Efficiency: 228%]

Dexterity: 2,373 [Increase: 75%. Efficiency: 187%]

Endurance: 4,373 [Increase: 96%. Efficiency: 228%]

Vitality: 3,255 [Increase: 84%. Efficiency: 228%]

Intelligence: 1,176 [Increase: 69%. Efficiency: 187%]

Wisdom: 2,211 [Increase: 76%. Efficiency: 187%]

Luck: 397 [Increase: 91%. Efficiency: 197%]

Free Points: 80

Nexus Coins: [D] 938,716

Eight levels just from cramming pills down his throat over two weeks was a pretty damn good result. Especially considering he'd managed to gain five levels during his first round of pill-stuffing in the early E-grade. The boost in attributes was significant as well, pushing his attribute total by 10%, with most of them focused on his main attributes. And he still had eight levels worth of attributes to pick up from his human side.

Unfortunately, there was no way for him to rapidly elevate his human levels at the moment. He definitely wouldn't break the seal on his Duplicity Core in this place, especially after the attention Catheya's master had given him. However, there would hopefully be a chance for him to sneak off and gain the levels after entering the Twilight Ocean.

Zac hesitated about what to do with his free points. After some thought, he put half of them into Strength to push it to 5,090. Unfortunately, he hadn't been rewarded a title for passing 5,000 points in a single attribute. He'd hoped for something like his Promising Specialist title, but perhaps such a title would need 10,000 points in a single attribute, if there even was a title that could stack with his old one.

After having given his raw power a slight boost, Zac put the rest of his free points into Dexterity. He closed the Status Screen and walked out to where Vilari still sat, surrounded by the soothing haze from an incense stick.

"Are you okay?" Vilari asked as she turned her head toward him. "Your aura is a bit unstable."

"Gaining levels isn't risk-free even when taking pills, it seems," Zac said as he sat next to her with a grunt. "The gains were good though."

"I'm glad to see young master finally getting rid of the bottleneck." Vilari smiled. "A living Hegemon courier will arrive in twenty hours."

"Great." Zac nodded.

“There’s also this.” Vilari handed him a couple of Cosmos Sacks and a communication crystal.

The Cosmos Sacks held the custom orders he’d placed during his shopping spree, containing everything from arrays and Array Breakers to customized gear for his followers back home.

The most important arrays were obviously the arrays required for the [**Nine Reincarnations Manual**]. Kenzie had already managed to create them before she was taken, but the array disks she’d made were as large as a tennis court, and they still contained small errors. This time, he prepared everything for both his second and third reincarnation.

The arrays meant for the fourth reincarnation were impossible to have made since they required specific materials that weren’t available in Twilight Harbor.

The disks he’d commissioned were made by a Peak Hegemon Array Master. The Elemental had managed to squeeze the arrays onto disks no larger than the size of his palm. They were also engraved on extremely valuable materials, making them perfect conductors of energy and almost impossible to break.

Unfortunately, it was impossible for him to work toward the second reincarnation at the moment. Each level added more stringent requirements on the cultivation environment. He would probably be able to use the arrays back in his cultivation cave, but not here in some random courtyard. He might be able to make use of the weird Twilight Energy inside the Mystic Realm, but wasn’t too sure he would be relaxed enough to sit around and cultivate his soul.

The second most important arrays he’d ordered were the set of [**E-grade Fractal Framework Arrays**]. They were the best mobile array for skill evolution he could get his hands on, and half of them were even modified to especially tailor to his Axe and Coffin Daos and class archetype. One could even tailor the arrays to his pathways and skill fractals, but he wasn’t willing to display those to the Array Masters, no matter what kind of confidentiality agreement they had.

He still wasn't quite ready to perform a manual upgrade of his F-grade skills, but the Twilight Ascent would last three years unless he left early. He needed to be prepared just in case.

As for the communication crystal, it came from Catheya. Zac scanned its contents and snorted with a mix of annoyance and helplessness. She thanked him for providing such great company and entertainment, and also praised him for his adroit usage of his newly acquired skills. More importantly, Catheya also called him for a meeting to meet the rest of the squad members in one month's time.

Zac spent the rest of the day getting used to his evolved body, marveling at how good it was. And this was without the hidden nodes and bloodline talents of the Draugr bloodline. He could absolutely understand why Revenant clans were so desperate to add noble genes into their family line.

He also surreptitiously experimented a bit with his **[Force of the Void]**, and was a bit surprised that it didn't quite match the energy reserve boosts he got from his Race Upgrade. In fact, he only got half of it. Zac's best guess was that it was because of his human side. His bloodline was split between his human and Draugr halves, and it looked like his bloodline talent provided a reserve equivalent to 27% of his average energy storage capabilities.

That was both good news and bad news. Bad in the sense that he wouldn't get the most out of the bloodline talent in his undead form. Good in the sense it probably meant his human side benefitted from this situation, which was especially nice considering he used more energy-hungry skills there.

It was also interesting in that this was the first time one of his sides could benefit the other. Apart from the attribute gain, that is. Of course, there was no way for him to test out whether his theory was correct until he could freely swap between his classes.

The hours passed, and a chime sounded at his gate, indicating the courier had arrived. Vilari opened the gate, and

Zac saw a woman accompanied by the two enforcement captains.

“Young master,” the pale woman said with a nod. Zac did a double take as he let the trio into the courtyard.

He would definitely have guessed the middle-aged woman was a Revenant, if not for the weak hints of life force hidden within a storm of murky energies. Zac didn't know why, but the force made him think of Leviala's eyes. Was this woman perhaps a Hexmaster gravitating toward the Daos of Death? That would explain why she leaned toward the unliving factions.

“I heard young master was looking for someone to make a few purchases among the living establishments?” she said, nervously glancing at the two captains, whose eyes never left her body.

“No offense, but are you even able to get into the pill houses of the Dreamers?” Zac asked hesitantly.

“Truth be told, I cannot do business with the treemen. They are the race with the most... inflexible convictions. But the others won't mind me cultivating in death. There's too many of us like this,” she said. “Bad business to turn all that money away.”

“You come recommended by this establishment,” Zac said as he took out a crystal. “I need everything on this list.”

The woman nodded and scanned the contents, and her eyes widened a bit at the numbers.

The purchase order Zac prepared was nowhere close to what he bought until now, but still a pretty huge number of resources. Most of it was Peak-quality items such as Supreme Divine Crystals or hard-to-find pills. There was none of the more common stuff, as Zac could buy all those things at a huge discount back in the Zecia Sector.

The total value of the items was almost two thousand D-grade Nexus Coins.

“This requires a few days and a massive amount of capital,” the Hexmaster hesitantly said.

“I’ll pay you two thousand Nexus Coins for the items on the list, half up front. Your remuneration depends on how good the deals are you can find. I’ll pay you the rest upon delivery of the items,” Zac said. “Are you amenable to these terms?”

“This... Alright,” she said, nodding.

Zac guessed that go-between parties like the Hexmaster had their connections, and she would likely get a kickback on the purchases. Even if she just got a 1% commission from the pill house, she’d still make ten D-grade Nexus Coins, a great salary for a few days of errands. The only issue was whether she had the ability to fork out one thousand D-grade Nexus Coins until she got paid, and it was a bit of a test from Zac.

If she didn’t have those kinds of reserves, she might not even be able to gain access to some of the items he needed.

They signed a contract, and the Hexmaster disappeared, leaving only a rune hovering in the air for a few seconds before it dissipated. Zac could somewhat tell it was a trap. Not for him, particularly, but rather as part of her movement skill. Anyone who touched that rune would probably be exposed to the Hexmaster, who could throw out a curse remotely.

The two guard captains nodded in Zac’s direction and returned to their position outside.

“What now?” Vilari asked after she closed the gate.

“Well, we’re pretty free for a while,” Zac said. “How about we take advantage of our bodyguards and go sightsee a bit?”

COMING ALIVE

Zac had accomplished everything he set out to do with some time to spare, which left him and his follower with over a month of free time.

“How about we visit a restaurant to celebrate your success?” Vilari suggested.

“My body is only partly awake.” Zac smiled. “I still need to reach Peak E-grade for my organs to be like the living’s. But it should be possible for me to eat and drink by now.”

The ability to eat and drink was obviously not as exciting for Zac as it was for the real undead. Still, he was a bit curious. He took out one of the bottles of spiritual wine in his Spatial Ring to test the waters. He took a swig and was happy to feel the burn in his throat and a weak buzz.

However, he blanched at the taste, which could best be described as diaper-left-in-sun. Zac spat out the wine before he looked at the bottle with a mix of confusion and disgust. It was brewed with F-grade grapes grown on the main island of Port Atwood, and had been bottled just a year ago. Had it already gone bad?

“I read tastes are quite different between the living and undead, even after our senses awaken,” Vilari said with a slight smile as she took out a crystal decanter with a light blue wine. “I prepared this for this very occasion. Have a taste.”

Zac spat a few more times and rinsed his mouth with some water before he gratefully took the decanter and a glass. When he poured it, it gave off an earthy fragrance, which made Zac

think of the forest after rain. He took a sip and had to admit it tasted great. Zac guessed it had to have been brewed with some fruits with death-attuned energies, since he felt a slight surge spread through his body.

“Delicious,” Zac sighed as he leaned back and looked up at the entrance to the Twilight Ocean.

Innumerable ships scuttled back and forth through the Void, and that was just a fraction of the activity happening on the various platforms. Hundreds of billions of lives held together by the Twilight Rivers and a Mystic Realm. Life and death intermingling. Zac beheld the spectacle as a warm buzz from the wine spread through his body.

It all felt very beautiful, and Zac actually almost choked up at the thought, prompting him to look down at the liquor with confusion.

“It’s not really the wine that’s affecting your mental state.” Vilari laughed, and the scene made Zac’s heart beat an extra time. “It’s your being coming alive.”

Zac understood what was going on and took a calming breath as he stabilized his mind. His senses were enhanced, or rather magnified, and the same was true for his moods. His emotions had always been a bit muted in his undead form, but they now felt clearer than ever.

This wasn’t actually anything unique to him, he just hadn’t noticed anything different until the wine pushed the effect a bit further. Most undead had trouble adjusting to this new state of being, which sometimes resulted in unwanted physical responses. After all, Low-tier undead were essentially energy beings that used an unliving body as a receptacle for their souls and ichor. Zac had simply figured this period of acclimatization wouldn’t happen to him since he was more used to having a living breathing body than not.

Still, the effect wasn’t overly powerful, and Zac got used to the difference in no time. Still, he was a bit embarrassed since Vilari had no doubt sensed the fluctuations in his soul when he looked over in her direction.

“What do you think of this place?” Zac asked to change the subject. “Do you think this is the direction our home will take?”

“I hope not,” Vilari answered after some thought.

“Oh?” Zac said with surprise.

“This place is ultimately no different compared to the Zecia Sector. It’s just living factions and undead factions living in the same area. They only tolerate each other’s existence because of the uniqueness of the Twilight Ocean. I pray that our world will not turn into this. I hope our people one day can integrate with the others,” Vilari explained.

Zac sighed and nodded, though he didn’t know if that was possible. Then again, that fusion was the very thing his own cultivation path required, and the direction in which Earth’s World Core was heading. And Be’Zi had found a husband among the living, so it wasn’t a completely ridiculous concept.

“Don’t mind my rambling,” Vilari added. “I understand the problems you and our planet are facing. It’s impossible for the Einherjar to walk in the light right now. But I hope that one day young master reaches such a height that you can follow your own wishes rather than having to worry about what outsiders think. I don’t feel there is any shame in being undead, and I don’t feel that anything is stopping the living and dead from working together.”

“You’re right,” Zac agreed. “I’ll try my best.”

They enjoyed the view for another hour before Zac felt his body was stabilized enough to go out.

With his two Hegemon guards wearing the livery of the Twilight Lord himself, he was safer than ever, especially among those who knew who he actually was. That spear of ice had been visible through half of Twilight Harbor. Hegemons and Monarchs alike knew the power it represented. Even in a place like this, there would likely be fewer than five Peak Monarchs, all of them outsiders from the B-grade empires.

Catheya’s master hadn’t mentioned anything about continuously protecting him, but Zac wagered her master

would keep an eye out since Zac carried that weird egg-like item in his Spatial Ring.

Seeing as it would take the courier a while to complete her tasks, Zac spent the next few days taking in the sights with Vilari. The first place they visited was an orchestra of Musical Cultivators, and Zac was blown away by the performance. It almost felt like he had an epiphany listening to the haunting melodies, conjured all kinds of imagery in his mind.

They also visited a few restaurants, though only Zac could eat while Vilari kept him company. Having food prepped solely with spiritual materials, from the vegetables to the meat to the spices, and then having it all prepared by skilled chefs was an almost otherworldly experience.

Zac had always somewhat looked down on those who gave up on their cultivation after reaching a certain stage, but was this kind of life really so bad? As long as you got powerful enough, you could enjoy this transcendent lifestyle for millennia. Of course, that life was ultimately not for him. He had too many people depending on him to think of retiring early.

Besides, these kinds of experiences paled compared to the feeling of pushing his cultivation and insights forward. To evolve his Dao was to become more in tune with the universe, and to gain a level was to take a step toward perfection. How could good food and entertainment rival those sensations?

The Hexmaster returned after three days with every single item on the list accounted for, which meant everything was prepared before the Twilight Ascent. There were still fifty days until the trial started, and Zac only had to meet up with Catheya once apart from focusing on his cultivation. He could probably evolve his Fragment of the Axe at any time with the help of one or two of his Dao Fruits, but he held off on it.

The System-sanctioned trial was related to the Dao, and it would be a bit stupid if he evolved his Fragment prematurely only to find out the task was to make as many breakthroughs as possible. Instead, he focused on improving his combat style when he wasn't touring the city. There was only so much he

could do, unfortunately. Swinging his axe into thin air or even sparring with the Hegemon captains was just mimicry of real battle.

He needed some spark of inspiration to improve.

Luckily, there was one place that might provide just that, and Zac had the captains escort him and Vilari to a massive coliseum on a platform pretty close to the center of Twilight Harbor. It was there that the qualifiers for the Twilight Ascent were being held, and a thousand battles raged at any given moment.

It would normally be impossible to see the battles clearly from the stands, but the coliseum was equipped with a pretty magical illusion array. Any battle Zac focused on was somehow enlarged so he could see it clearly, even if it was kilometers away.

There were all kinds of battles to spectate. Undead fought against undead, living against living, and the two sides often clashed. All the battles were frantic, as winning might mean getting a ticket to the greatest opportunity in a millennium. And the battles between the living and the dead were extraordinarily ruthless.

You were not allowed to kill someone who'd given up, and the judges tried to save lives when it was clear the battle was over. But how often did people get the opportunity to throw in the towel when you were going all out to seize victory? Life and death happened in the blink of an eye. Battles kept resulting in fatalities, much to the excitement of the crowd.

The qualifiers were not only a way to get an entrance token for E-grade cultivators, it was also a showcase of strength between the living and the dead. After all, while this might be a gray zone, there were definitely some tensions running beneath the surface. It was just like Vilari said, the living and dead weren't really living in harmony. They were just tolerating each other to reap the benefits of the Twilight Ocean.

Zac himself didn't care about any of that. Seeing so many battles did give him some inspiration. He'd truly

underestimated the young elites of the Multiverse. Many of the true talents of Twilight Harbor weren't even participating in these qualifiers thanks to their reserved spots. That didn't lessen the number of shocking battles he saw over the two weeks he visited the coliseum with Vilari.

There were tens of thousands of cultivators he felt would push him extremely hard to come out ahead, and over a hundred he had absolutely no confidence winning against unless he managed to hit them with an Annihilation Sphere. The latter group was made up of Peak E-grade cultivators who had accumulated power for over a century, but that fact didn't help in a battle of life and death.

Six particular elites even pressured Zac almost as much as Iz Tayn had, the terrifying flame cultivator he encountered during the Battle of Fates. Against her, Zac hadn't even dared fight. Only escape had been on his mind when he faced that lunatic. Of course, these six definitely had a significant level advantage against him, and their auras were still extremely condensed, far surpassing Catheya's.

There was only so much you could gain from watching strangers battle, and Zac eventually grew bored of viewing the endless carnage. He did, however, place an order for an intelligence missive on the top ten thousand contenders. It wouldn't hurt to memorize the names and faces of some of the individuals he needed to be careful around in the trial.

Since there were still a few days before the meeting with Catheya, he decided to visit the mortician she'd recommended. It was at the outer edge of Twilight Harbor, and almost looked like he was visiting a military fortress rather than a business. There were extremely powerful barriers protecting the area, and Miasmic towers radiating a power that made Zac's hair stand on end.

Were he blasted with the attacks stored in those things, not even ashes would remain.

"What's with the defenses?" Zac asked curiously as he turned to the Revenant captain.

“Bodies are a contentious subject in Twilight Harbor,” the captain said with a smile. “Some corpses put up for sale have once been members of the living clans. The morticians modify the appearances of the unawakened, but their previous identities are sometimes exposed. This place suffers attacks almost every decade.”

Zac nodded in understanding as they passed through the barriers. Twilight Harbor probably got a steady supply of bodies from all over, but sourcing locally was ultimately the easiest. As demand for new followers was unending among the unliving clans, there would always be people desecrating graves or killing youths to sell their corpses.

The mortician had unfortunately already held a huge auction a month before Zac arrived to Twilight Harbor, leaving the stock a bit bare. He did manage to buy one hundred thousand mid-quality E-grade corpses with no connection to the Undead Empire. He also bought ten Peak-quality corpses, each once belonging to a Peak cultivator. The bodies were also cleansed of any Karma and slightly enhanced by various means, especially the Peak corpses.

Hopefully, they would have been turned into a promising army by the time he returned to Port Atwood.

Before he knew it, the day to meet up with Catheya arrived, but there was one more thing he needed to do before heading to the Eldritch Archivals. The Twilight Ascent started in two weeks, so it was time to send Vilari back to Earth.

He had the enforcers take them to the teleportation platform, where he transferred the funds necessary to teleport back, along with another five hundred D-grade Nexus Coins to be added to the town coffers just in case. He also gave her the eight enormous Spatial Rings containing all the resources he didn't need for himself.

“I'll leave the Einherjar in your hands,” Zac said as they stood outside one of the teleporters. “Don't tell anyone that I'll be stuck in the Mystic Realm for up to three years. I don't want people to get any foolish ideas while I'm gone. Give Joanna the rings meant for the... others. For the Einherjar, I

leave it up to you. My only request, make them prove themselves if they want the resources.”

“I’ll get it done,” Vilari said with a nod. “Don’t worry about Por—home. You have nurtured many talents who will keep everything running smoothly. Good luck in there.”

Zac nodded, and he watched as the Mentalist disappeared in a flash of light, starting her two-week journey through the Void. Only a few minutes later did he leave, heading straight for Clan Sharva’Zi’s Dao Repository. He was a bit early, yet he found Catheya waiting outside the gates, dressed completely different from what he’d seen before.

She usually donned cultivation dresses in darker overtones, but was now clad in something a courtesan might wear. The dress was both snug and low cut, and her hair was held up with a few pins that gave her a very seductive aura. The ensemble was even more suggestive than what the sultry Revenant guide had worn, and her appearance kept turning heads as customers walked back and forth. Of course, no one dared to get close, as three Hegemon guards glared at anyone who looked her way.

The captains set down the vessels and waited outside as Zac walked to his employer with a slight frown.

“I see your cultivation session went well,” Catheya said with an impish smile as she bent slightly forward, showcasing an impressive amount of cleavage. “So, what do you think?”

Zac blankly looked at her with a mix of confusion and suspicion, wondering why she was suddenly trying to seduce him. Had his ability to escape the Hegemon been that dashing? And was undead courtship always this... blatant?

Their gazes were locked for a few seconds until Catheya’s expression started to sour as she looked Zac up and down.

“About what?” Zac eventually asked.

“Nothing,” Catheya snorted with annoyance, her daring dress morphing into one that looked more like her normal attire before she headed toward the closest entrance. “Cultivation moron.”

Only then did Zac realize what was going on. He'd already felt the side effects of his body awakening. Catheya had probably figured out that he'd bought the **[Fruit of Awakening]** for himself, considering it shouldn't have been hard for her master to glean his body was still unawakened.

Was she hoping to make him blush or accidentally pop a boner like a hormonal teenager? Too bad for her he'd already gone through puberty over two decades ago.

“And it's not possible that you're simply not as mesmerizing as you believe?” Zac said with a small smile as he followed her into the building.

“Absolutely impossible,” Catheya said with a shake of her head. “Varo couldn't look in my direction for a month after evolving.”

“Well, some have deviant tastes.” Zac shrugged, which awarded him another baleful glare.

Zac was well aware Catheya would be considered a great beauty among Draugr. Unfortunately for her, Zac still mostly considered himself human. Looking into those abyssal orbs for eyes instantly quenched any sort of desire.

“Well, whatever,” Catheya snorted, entering a chamber where five people waited. “The others are already here. Come introduce yourself.”

PERENNIAL VASTNESS

Zac floated in the emptiness of space next to Catheya, and his new allies formed a small clump in an endless sea of E-grade cultivators. Thousands upon thousands of groups had gathered around him, in a roughly even mix between life and death. There were also millions of lone cultivators spread amongst the groups, waiting for the Twilight Ascent to start.

The accumulated aura of over ten million warriors was something else. Yet it was nothing compared to the one hundred thousand Hegemons who gathered on the opposite side of the glowing star in front of him. Their frightful power could be sensed even at a distance of thousands of kilometers. It was no wonder the two groups had been instructed to gather far away from each other.

The pressure didn't come just from afar though, as Zac sensed some auras nearby that could overpower his own. He even recognized a few faces from the intelligence missives he'd had prepared for the trial.

Thankfully, one's aura wasn't an exact measurement of combat power. With Zac's accumulations and aces, he wasn't a fish on a chopping block set before even the greatest of E-grade warriors. Furthermore, those monstrous elites from the undead kingdoms or living empires would hopefully head for the core of the Twilight Ocean, while his group wouldn't pass the 70% mark, according to Catheya.

Zac estimated himself to be in the top quartile among the trial-takers. If he could evolve his Dao Fragments and find some more opportunities over the next three years, he might

even make it to the top percent, which would allow him to complete the mission for Va Tapek, Catheya's master, with some degree of success.

Zac was suddenly dragged out of his thoughts as two new people popped up out of nowhere, their arrival not even causing the slightest ripple of Cosmic Energy. The clamor in the area immediately died down, as these two demanded everyone's undivided attention by their presence alone.

One was an ancient-looking treeman over thirty meters tall. On top of his head was a small tree crown with golden leaves, each covered in dense scripts. His body was generally humanoid in shape, with two legs and two arms, though his face was simply at the top of the trunk right beneath his crown. Sprouting out of his back were thousands of branches, forming an intricate diamond pattern.

But most striking was the vast aura of life he exuded.

His features somehow made him look old, but it felt like he would live forever going by his aura. Almost like the glowing Twilight Ocean had dimmed in his presence. He was clearly a cultivator following some path of nature, and just looking at him made him feel like he was caught inside the energy emanations of the Dimensional Seed again.

However, it was just an illusion formed by the treant's latent will. His aura was clearly restrained and it didn't hurt anyone. Zac wasn't actually inundated in any energies, since he would probably die if that happened.

Next to the powerful treeman stood a hooded being, looking almost like a fly next to the massive treant.

His aura was just as shocking as the treant's, and Zac felt the grip of death clutching his heart when glancing in his direction. The air itself practically teetered on the brink of collapse from the force hidden within those robes.

"It's the Goldenleaf Monarch and Kaard'Es Venarun, the Moonblight Monarch," Catheya said with a low voice. "Both are Middle-stage Monarchs and Supreme Elders of two of the council clans. I didn't expect such big shots to appear today."

Zac nodded in understanding. He didn't know what force the treant was from, but he'd heard of the Venarun Clan. The undead side of the council was manned by three clans, one sect, and one consortium, with the sect holding the greatest power. One of those clans was the Venarun Clan, a local Revenant clan with some bloodline of the Izh'Rak Reavers.

"Welcome, trial-takers," the Goldenleaf Monarch said with a smile. "The gates will open in a few moments, and the council wishes to make sure everyone understands the rules of the Twilight Ascent. Most of you are local talents chosen to represent your forces, but some are also faraway guests.

"The Twilight Energy will sap your energy, robbing you of your power. The energy is unique and most likely modified by the Boundless Heavens. It will burrow into your body whether you want it or not, and the amount is mostly based on your level and how deep into the ocean you have gone. There are various means to reduce its effect, but no method is as effective as improving yourself," the Goldenleaf Monarch continued. "Making breakthroughs and boosting your attribute pool will allow you to reach further, to gain more from this trial."

"The laws are the same as in the rest of the Multiverse," the Moonblight Monarch, Kaard'Es Venarun, added with a rough voice, and Zac felt an almost primal fear upon hearing him speak. "The law of the jungle. Kill, steal, and battle to your heart's content. Hone yourself through slaughter and mayhem. The council will not interfere."

A dense killing intent spread through the whole zone as warriors surreptitiously glanced around. Cultivators who had reached the end of E-grade all had blood on their hands, some far more than Zac himself. It was an unfortunate reality of the world: cultivation didn't require only time and Cosmic Energy.

It required a steely conviction and mental fortitude that would allow them to keep going down the same path for centuries and millennia. And that kind of mental strength couldn't be cultivated inside a cultivation cave. It was gradually formed through risking one's life and bloodshed. There might be a few beings in perfect tune with their path and

with sublime mental states that didn't require this kind of training, but those people were beyond rare in number.

“Remember, the council will not have any opinions on your actions inside, but that doesn't mean your actions have no consequences. Cause an undue amount of slaughter and trouble might find you, either inside the trial or even the moment you exit. Furthermore, slaughtering the weak is a dead end with meager rewards. The true opportunities are waiting for you in the depths of the Twilight Ocean,” the old treant said.

“The council has studied the ocean, and we expect it to stay open for three years and two months,” the Goldenleaf Monarch continued. “Staying the whole duration is not required to take a position on the Fate-Plucking Ladder. Knowing when to retreat is an important skill of any adventurer.”

“But remember. The gates will be closed for one year after entering. You'd better have the means to stay alive if you want to enter the ocean. Otherwise, you'll just turn to fertilizer for others.” The Venarun elder, Kaard'Es, snickered. “The first year and the last months are always the bloodiest.”

Zac inwardly nodded in agreement, unsurprised. In the beginning, there would be ten million warriors at the starting continent, all full of adrenaline and greed for treasures. Bloodshed was bound to happen. Things would gradually stabilize as people died and started leaving after a year, but the carnage would pick up pace near the end.

By that point, everyone's Cosmos Sacks would be bulging with loot, and a single battle might double someone's net worth. Beasts die for food; men die for money.

“I am sure everyone is curious about the reward this time around.” The treant smiled, causing an excited murmur through the crowd.

A huge plaque appeared the next moment, clearly listing the treasures.

1st – [50-year Perennial Vastness Token]

**2nd–5th – [E-grade Reforged Providence Gem] & one
unique treasure presented by the Twilight Council**

**6th–10th – [E-grade Reforged Providence Gem] & one
supreme treasure of the Twilight Vault**

...

**5,001st–10,000th – 3rd Class E-grade Treasure from the
Twilight Vault.**

Zac found the rewards even in the top thousand were pretty good. For instance, the top one hundred would get to pick a Special Class E-grade treasure from the Twilight Vault. The Twilight Vault was a shared hoard guarded by the Twilight Lord and the council, and had accumulated mountains of valuable items over millions of years.

Special Class E-grade treasures were at the level of the items in the second part of the auction, and every single one could provide a drastic improvement if you found a suitable one. As for the top-ten prizes, they were all things that wouldn't reach a public auction, especially the top five.

Zac didn't hold out much hope for those things after seeing the preliminary duels, but he still read the rewards with interest.

“Perennial Vastness? What's that?” Ravan, one of Zac's new team members, muttered with confusion, sparing Zac the need to ask.

Ravan was a local to Twilight Harbor, an elite, naturally born Corpselord from a subsidiary force to the Sharva'Zi Clan. He was just like Mhal in a sense, though his accomplishments far eclipsed the general who caused Zac so much trouble back then. His role in the party was as a pure offensive combatant, though Zac still didn't know exactly what kind of class he held.

His aura indicated some sort of spellcaster class, which was a bit surprising to Zac considering the buff physique of the man.

“It is a High-grade Immemorial Realm. Some say it's older than the System itself,” Catheya said with a small frown. “I'm

surprised the council even has a token at all, let alone putting something so valuable as a reward. Our competition might just have gotten more heated.”

“It’s that precious?” Ravan asked.

Zac looked over with curiosity. He hadn’t heard about Immemorial Realms in a while. Mystic Realms were the lowest tier of hidden worlds in the Multiverse. Above those came the Ancient Realms. Even the nearby B-grade forces, such as the Radiant Temple, only had access to a few such cultivation havens. As for Immemorial Realms, they had none. It was exactly the kind of place his mother wanted to enter with Kenzie, but even she wasn’t confident in succeeding. That alone told a story of just how valuable the Perennial Vastness Token was.

“I’m not sure about the details either.” Catheya shrugged. “The Perennial Vastness is controlled by a mysterious unattached force that sends out a million tokens into the Multiverse every thousand years or so. Even people living in top-tier factions of the Multiverse would try to get one for themselves.”

“Why isn’t the empire snatching that place if it’s so good?” Zac asked.

“I’m not sure. That force must possess extreme power for it to remain for hundreds of millions of years,” Catheya said. “Besides, it’s very far away from the Undead Empire, which is why I didn’t expect a token to appear in this region.”

“What’s the value for us E-grade warriors?” Ravan asked.

“Evolution,” Catheya said. “Any Peak E-grade cultivator who enters the Perennial Vastness is essentially guaranteed to emerge with a Cultivator’s Core. More importantly, their cores are far sturdier compared to normal, approaching perfection.”

“What!” Ravan exclaimed, his eyes turning back to the board, his whole face a mask of desire.

Zac understood the feeling. His own heart beat with greed. He’d long learned the goal of the D-grade. If the F-grade revolved around collecting as many titles as possible, and the

E-grade around finding and opening hidden nodes, then everything in the D-grade circulated around the Cultivator's Core. More specifically, the Cosmic Core.

Successfully forming the Cosmic Core was just the first step. The whole D-grade was spent strengthening and perfecting it. That was why some considered the first step the most important. One could gradually improve a core through hard work and various opportunities, but you would obviously save a huge amount of effort if you started with a sturdy foundation.

If you started with a Low-quality core, you might exhaust all your momentum perfecting it over millennia, if you ever reached perfection. After all, the main goal of the D-grade was to elevate one's core to the point it could withstand the formation of an inner world of the C-grade.

And even internal worlds differed greatly, from what Zac had heard. The better the core, the larger the inner world you would be able to form, which would make you comparatively stronger to other Monarchs.

That was what made this opportunity sound so overpowered. To guarantee a successful formation by itself was to beat the one-to-a-million odds. And to greatly improve its foundation as well? That wildly enhanced the chances that you'd be able to reach the C-grade, something that might only happen once every hundred thousand years in a Peak force in the Zecia Sector.

"You can put that out of your mind," Catheya snorted. "We're a pretty powerful group, but we're far from a Peak squad. With this token on the line, the hidden Heaven's Chosen will come out in force, unleashing a bloodbath in search of Twilight Fruits."

"Anything's possible," Ravan muttered without much conviction.

The fires hadn't died out in Ravan's eyes, but Zac didn't hold out much hope for the Corpselord. He was clearly a cut above most, but there was ultimately only one token. Even if

he managed to get the token through some huge stroke of luck, would he be able to hold on to it?

This kind of item seemed like something good enough that even Monarchs would make a move. Giving it to an elite of their faction greatly increased the odds of another Monarch appearing in a few thousand years. That could completely shift the power dynamic of a faction. In fact, Zac even bet it was the System that forced them to add the token as a reward, and people were already planning in the shadows how to snatch it.

“Nine redo tokens as well,” Sharpo, their spectral scout, said with longing. “I heard that only the second and third position got one last time.”

Zac had learned about redo tokens before, the **[Reforged Providence Gems]**. He could absolutely understand the ghost’s desire. The gems were definitely good stuff.

One thing Zac had always felt was weird was how those who didn’t perform that well in the F-grade were relegated to always lag behind those who managed to gather the best titles. However, it turned out that wasn’t completely true. One method to catch up was to perform similar exhibits of power in the later grades. That would usually result in a similar, but diminished, title.

The redo tokens were another method to catch up.

They really gave you a shot at a do-over in case you performed badly in the early stages of your cultivation. For example, what if you only got the Giantsbane back then, the title for killing a beast five levels above you? It was actually possible to use the gem to shoot for the Apex Predator title, something that would be impossible in the E-grade even for Zac.

The token would let you choose a title to improve and generate a fitting trial for it, just like his own Sovereignty quests. Though the difficulty would be increased compared to getting it right the first time. Most importantly, the System would use your current attainments as the template before restricting you down to the F-grade. It would still be an extremely challenging task to get the particular Apex Predator

title, but it was at least achievable if you'd gone from an average cultivator to a supreme Heaven's Chosen.

Zac definitely wanted one if he could get his hands on such a token, but he wasn't too enthused since he had most of the Peak titles. His interest might have been bigger if it worked on trial-related titles, such as the one from the Tower of Eternity, but the token was limited to general achievement titles.

Perhaps it was possible to improve the Child of Dao title, which he suspected was one of the greatest progenitor titles. Otherwise, he might be able to hunt down some other Low-quality title in the future and use the redo token to turn that title into a top-quality F-grade variant. In the end, he was just making up scenarios since his odds of getting one of the nine tokens were pretty abysmal.

"The items provided to the top one thousand aren't bad at all and is a far more achievable goal," Catheya snorted. "A first-class treasure from the vault can probably improve either your strength or chance of reaching Hegemony by 10%."

Zac personally had his eyes on the top one hundred reward, though he didn't have much confidence. It all depended on how things panned out over the next three years. That was his biggest advantage. Many of those with auras far surpassing his had mostly exhausted their potential in the E-grade, while he still had ample room to grow.

The other warriors floating in space animatedly discussed the unusually generous rewards, while some looked at the sign with troubled faces. Zac understood their worry. The rewards were one tier higher than normal across the board. It was almost like the council was encouraging a mass slaughter for the Twilight Fruits. The mortality rate would definitely be higher than normal this time around.

Everyone had their own thoughts on the situation, but the clamor died down as an enormous scar appeared in front of them. It kept expanding until it was over a thousand meters across, at which point it stabilized and turned into some type of gate.

“Here, take this,” Catheya said as she took out a round stone ball that Zac likened to an orange. It even had ten detachable wedges. “Keep it on you. Our first goal is gathering before we set out. You’ll be able to sense me more than the others, but group up if possible. If a single one of us falls in the initial phase, the rest will have a harder time gathering the pearls.”

She took off one slice after another, giving one to each member of the squad. Zac put it into one of his pockets without comment. The item was a tracking device, which allowed the squad to sense the position of their allies as long as they infused the item with some Miasma. It was a higher-grade solution compared to the flares Galau had used back in the Tower of Eternity.

The group didn’t need to wait more than thirty minutes before the massive gates swung open, and revealed a wall of water with a greenish hue waiting on the other side.

The Twilight Ocean.

THE TWILIGHT OCEAN

“Good luck,” the Goldenleaf Monarch said after the portal in front of the waiting trial-takers stabilized. “Remember, the moment you pass through those gates, you will have to spend a minimum of one year in the Twilight Ocean. This is your final chance to back away.”

No one left after the warning, though Zac wouldn't be surprised if some found themselves unable to take that final step through the wall of water. He was personally filled with anticipation for the opportunities within. He'd been through so many life-and-death encounters at this point, this venture felt relatively safe in comparison to some of his other experiences.

Meanwhile, some participants probably had limited experiences with death and had been raised in the relative safety of their clans.

The first people to enter were the descendants of the council factions, followed by the premiere local clans. It was a small show of force to have the outsiders wait, even if they were descendants of B-grade forces. Catheya still had seeded slots, so it was their turn after just three hours. By that point, only four hundred thousand cultivators had passed through, meaning most were still waiting their turn.

“Remember to be careful,” Catheya said as they floated in front of the barrier. “The first culling has already started on the other side.”

The rest nodded before they flew through one by one. Zac didn't turn into the usual incorporeal consciousness shot

through the Void like during teleportation, but it rather felt like he'd been thrown into the middle of intense fireworks as his surroundings flashed gold and black. The energies surrounding him were immense, and Zac looked around with wonder, the almost nauseating lights appearing rife with hidden truths.

Suddenly, an immense pressure locked Zac in place, causing him to frown with worry. He'd read about the chaotic teleportation, but this pressure wasn't mentioned in any missive he'd bought. The next moment he felt a sharp pain from his finger as his Spatial Ring reached blistering temperatures. He sent a strand of mental energy into the ring and was filled with a sense of foreboding as he saw the odd egg shaking within.

Was it some sort of banned item?

Before Zac even had a chance to worry about getting slapped with a tribulation punishment for bringing contraband to the Twilight Ocean, a ten-meter rune rushed toward him, completely undeterred by the chaos, and passed through his body. A moment later, the pressure was gone and the egg had calmed down.

There was no time to make sense of things before he found himself standing in a foreign world. It looked like he was pretty lucky, having been dropped off at the edge of the starting continent, and he found himself standing up to his knees in a greenish-golden liquid. He'd read so much about it over the past months, but it was still exhilarating to see it with his own eyes.

Zac looked down at the water with interest as he activated [**Cosmic Gaze**]. He could confirm it was attuned with both life and death just like the missives explained, except he couldn't make sense of how the two had fused even after looking at the water for over a minute.

One second it felt like the two attunements were two opposites fighting for the same spot, vaguely familiar to his own path where life and death clashed in an endless war. And in the next moment, they coexisted in harmony, only to be either pure Life or Death. Finally, for short bursts of time, they

were melded into something unique that Zac couldn't begin to comprehend.

It was impossible to tell which state was the real one, or if the continuous transformations were even real. It might be a bit like those pictures that changed motif depending on what angle you looked at it from. Zac had initially hoped to make inroads into his path by visiting this place, but he honestly wasn't so confident that three years was even close to enough to unravel the mess he was looking at.

He was dragged out of his musings as a screen appeared in front of him.

**[Twilight Ascent. Help perfect the Tapestry of Twilight.
The reward at the end dependent on contribution rank.]**

**[There are two ways to contribute to the Tapestry of
Twilight.]**

**[1. Make a Dao breakthrough into a Dao pertaining to Life
or Death. Higher-grade breakthroughs provide more
points. Successive breakthroughs provide both rewards. If
no breakthroughs are made, half the value of current Dao
stages are added by the end of the trial.]**

Early Seed: 1

Middle Seed: 5

High Seed: 25

Peak Seed: 125

Early Fragment: 250

Middle Fragment: 1,250

High Fragment: 6,250

Peak Fragment: 31,250

Early Branch: 100,000

Middle Branch: 500,000

High Branch: 2,500,000

**[2. Release trapped Dao of Life or Death. This can be done
by consuming or destroying treasures of life or death, or**

killing cultivators or beasts holding related Daos.]

**[Rewards will be rewarded upon the end of the trial.
Participants leaving trial prematurely will have half of
their contribution points deducted.]**

[Choose Identity: Zac Piker – Arcaz Black]

Zac read the quest carefully, and his eyes widened further and further. How was this a Dao Trial if slaughtering people provided contribution points? This was Twilight Harbor, and at least a quarter of all warriors held a Dao related to either Life or Death. If things were bad with the exorbitant rewards from the Fate-Plucking Ladder, things had just become a true slaughter-fest.

He also intensely regretted holding back the evolution of his Fragment of the Axe in hopes a breakthrough inside the Mystic Realm would help him with the trial. Now it was just a liability until he could find a safe spot to stop and cultivate for a while. Still, he was in a very good position for the first method to accumulate contribution points, considering he had Daos of both Life and Death.

There might be some geniuses who had multiple Daos of Death attunement, but Zac doubted there could be too many. Having two Daos of similar function made little sense. It was better to either focus on one Dao and push it further or have multiple Daos that brought different things to the table, making you more well-rounded.

Of course, there might be some cultivators playing the long game, nurturing two death-attuned Dao Fragments to fuse them into one Dao Branch. In either case, Zac felt he had a good chance of snatching a good Limited Title, unless slaughter was a far more efficient method of accruing contribution points.

Furthermore, his Draugr heritage was definitely a detriment with these rules. Anyone he met would assume he held at least one Dao related to Death, which was true. After all, the Draugr held amazing affinity to the Daos of Death, making them walking treasure troves. As for the final line, it

ruined his chance to enter a pseudonym for the ladder, and he reluctantly chose Arcaz Black.

He doubted too many would know of the name Zac Piker, but Catheya definitely did. Zac being able to choose that name would definitely expose him. He could only go with his “real name.” At least the System didn’t force him to use his true name, but rather the cultivation identities he used.

A mental command made a new screen appear, proving there was a ladder this time.

[Arcaz Black – Contribution: 6,250. Rank: 22,538. Value: 100–250.]

His current contribution was at 6,250 as expected, the combined value of his two High Fragments. He guessed those points were just placeholders though until he evolved the Fragments of Bodhi and Coffin. As for his rank, he guessed that was due to people with higher Dao accomplishments than him. It looked like around 5% of those who entered so far had at least a Peak Fragment related to Life and Death, which didn’t feel too surprising.

There was a pretty worrying twist to the ladder. There was actually a value attached to his name, saying his life wasn’t worth more than gaining a Peak Dao Seed. It meant he would have to kill a thousand people like himself to gain the equivalent points of getting a single Dao Branch. It might not sound too bad, but everyone here would have stocked up on escape talismans and hidden aces.

Landing a killing blow wasn’t easy unless there was a large power discrepancy, and some battles would result in wounds that might be extra hard to heal in the odd environment of the Twilight Ocean.

Zac closed the screen and looked away from the water, turning toward the endless horizon. To his sides was an endless coast, lined by a dense forest, and far in the distance he could barely discern an island. The clouds were sparse and either wrought in black, gold, or a mixture of the two.

The sky itself held the same color as the spatial anomaly from the outside, a mix of gold and green that cast everything in a slightly metallic hue. Zac took in the view for a few more seconds, but he suddenly froze. He'd been so occupied with the shocking entry and the subsequent quest that he'd missed a crucial detail.

He had seen this place before.

It was years ago, and Zac's mind had been a mess at the time, but he was sure of it. It was back when the Mystic Realm collapsed, turning into the Memorysteel mountain and thousands of islands. Back then, the laws of space had been turned on their head, and Zac found himself witnessing a series of odd scenes.

Back then, he'd seen an alien world with a Shard of Creation nestled in the depths of a volcano. He had only caught a glimpse of the sky in that vision, but it definitely matched what he was looking at now. And if the Shard of Creation was here, it wouldn't be a surprise if the Splinter of Oblivion he'd seen in the depths of an ocean was also here.

Were the Remnants perhaps the source of the odd phenomena of this world? With Oblivion on one side and Creation on the other, this space had been affected by both. Add some Cosmic Energy and Miasma, and you had something called Twilight Energy by the natives.

Zac slowly shook his head, discarding the idea. It probably wasn't a coincidence that there were Remnants in a place like this, but it was unlikely they were the core of this world. First of all, their energies differed from what he felt around him. More importantly, they weren't powerful enough.

This realm was enormous and provided resources that even attracted Monarchs. The Remnants had been called Class 3 treasures by the Administrator back then. Zac's own estimates were along the same line, that they were Peak D-grade treasures. However, they also contained hints of extremely high-tiered concepts, which increased their danger compared to normal treasures of that grade.

The question was what to do with this knowledge. Should he go for it and try adding another set into his collection?

“Heurk.” A gagging sound dragged Zac out of his thoughts, and he looked over to see a humanoid curled up into a ball up on the beach.

Only then did Zac remember a piece of information in the crystal Nala had provided. According to the missive, the transfer put a great strain on one’s body, and it was a good idea to activate a defensive talisman the moment you arrived in the Twilight Ocean. That way, you’d be protected while you acclimatized to the weird energies in the air.

But why hadn’t he noticed anything like that?

Even now, standing in the odd life-death water, he was completely unaffected. His resistance to life-attuned energies was far greater compared to normal undead. But for him to be completely unaffected by the transfer? Was it the rune that passed through him? Even now, he wasn’t really bothered by the small amounts of energy that seeped into his body.

The human soon gained a sense of his surroundings, and was horrified when he saw a pureblood Draugr staring at him from just fifty meters away, seemingly unbothered by the Twilight Energy. Zac didn’t even have a chance to say anything before the man activated an escape talisman and disappeared.

Zac snorted as he turned back toward the ocean and started walking deeper into the water. There was no point in hunting that humanoid since a 0 had appeared above his head after Zac focused on him for two seconds. Zac guessed it was his value, meaning the cultivator didn’t cultivate either Life or Death. Perhaps releasing his energies wasn’t worth anything to the Tapestry of Twilight.

He soon found himself completely submerged as he took the first steps into the waters, and was relieved to find that visibility was a lot better than he initially feared. He could see for thousands of meters before it all turned into a greenish haze, and he could even spot a few other cultivators in the

distance. His eyes turned to a small reef not far away and he started moving toward it.

The viscosity of the liquid was a bit odd, far lower than water. He didn't actually float in the Twilight Ocean, but he could freely swim around as long as he expelled small amounts of Miasma. It was a bit like when he found himself in space, except he could actually breathe in the water somehow. Zac took out **[Rakan's Roar]** and swung it a few times before he nodded and stowed it away.

Until now, Zac hadn't really felt anything wrong with the Twilight Energy entering his body, but he started to feel some discomfort after moving through the water for ten minutes. He expelled some Miasma through his hands, after which he tried to restore his reserves with the accumulated energy. It worked, but almost felt like drinking brackish water because of the taint of life energy.

Thankfully, his **[Void Heart]** woke up after the accumulated energy reached a certain point, and one beat was enough to cleanse most of his body. Interestingly enough, his hidden node didn't actually consume Twilight Energy as a whole, but rather ripped out the life-attuned part and left behind clean death-attuned energy.

But it wasn't exactly Miasma that was left behind. It was some other type of death-attuned energy with a slightly different flavor. Still, it began replenishing his missing Miasma without any problems as his **[Purity of the Void]** started to work on the small amounts of life-attuned energies left behind. As for the death-attuned energies, Zac tried to push them toward the next node, but found himself utterly incapable of actually using the energy for cultivation.

Zac sighed in disappointment. He'd somewhat hoped he would be able to live the life as a cultivator for a second there. Of course, **[Void Heart]** would start spitting out some usable energy sooner or later, though it was only half of the Twilight Energy that entered his body. He wasn't too worried about the remaining energy either, since it wasn't harmful to him. He could always expel Miasma to absorb it into his cells if needed.

However, he looked on with wonder as the deathly energies actually started to move by themselves, but neither toward **[Void Heart]** or his normal nodes. They congealed and formed a stream that moved toward his head, where a small whirlwind had appeared on his soul aperture.

The deathly energies swam inside like they were coming home, and they entered the deathly ocean in his mind. A moment later, the energies were gone, completely integrated with the waters. Zac looked on with mute incomprehension, as nothing he had read in his **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]** mentioned anything like this.

Still, it didn't seem a bad thing that the deathly energy entered his mind, especially when it was in such small quantities. Although, he did find himself in a pretty odd situation as the last of the death-attuned energy was swallowed. Others were trying all kinds of ways to minimize the harmful effects of the Twilight Energy, using everything from arrays to continuously rotating their Daos.

Meanwhile, the various parts of his body were almost fighting for the energy, like it couldn't get enough. It was like he'd come home.

FIRST CULLING

The situation with the Twilight Energy was even better than Zac anticipated, but he wouldn't take anything for granted going forward. He was still at the outer edge of the Mystic Realm where the Twilight Energy was at its weakest. Who knew if he would be able to so effortlessly deal with the environment in the inner reaches? For example, his **[Void Heart]** couldn't infinitely swallow energy. It followed a cycle of absorption, purification, and release.

The same was true for his soul. He hadn't quite figured out what was going on, except that his soul aperture wasn't a true world. There should be limits on how much energy it could absorb before it became satiated. Also, from what he'd gathered, the elites of the trial would be able to exhibit pretty much their full power all the way to the midway point. He definitely wouldn't be able to run amok with this small advantage.

Zac reached the small forest of swaying seaweed and put the matter of Twilight Energy aside. His arm turned into a blur as he cut down over a dozen plants that emitted a weak hint of spirituality. His actions didn't garner him a single contribution point, proving there was no point in wantonly destroying the surroundings to "release Dao." It probably had to be real treasures to count.

Having gotten a decent understanding of the situation, he took out the small black stone he got from Catheya and infused it with some Miasma. He soon sensed a number of distant presences, with one particular connection being far

stronger than the others. It was hard to accurately estimate how far away Catheya was, but Zac felt it would take a couple of hours to get there.

Even then, her starting location seemed pretty lucky, just like his. Catheya should already be out in the ocean by the looks of things, while most of the markers were pointing toward the continent, where the majority of people were dropped off. They would probably have a much harder time gathering up with the ruthless rules of the trial. Of course, he didn't expect his own journey to be completely free from worries.

[Love's Bond] appeared on his back, and he started to make his way forward, choosing to run on the bottom of the ocean, his movement slightly boosted by small bursts of Miasma. Moving on the beach would definitely be easier if not for those appearing one after another along the shores and farther inland on the continent. The entrance time was staggered, ensuring it would be a continual bloodbath, as over ten million participants flooded inside.

A pang of danger erupted, and Zac looked down with surprise at a spear shooting out from the ocean floor. Although infused with a powerful penetrative force, it wasn't at a level that could kill him. Zac pushed himself away by expelling a burst of Miasma, his brows rising when he found himself stuck after moving just fifty meters.

An azure rope had appeared out of nowhere and attached itself to him, leading back to a large totem now taking the space he'd just fled. It was five meters in height, resembling an anchor that was dug into the seabed. Zac immediately understood it was some sort of binding skill, not dissimilar from the array the cultists had used against him a long time ago.

A living humanoid rose from the sandy floor, and he gave Zac a look of superiority after confirming he was caught by the rope. He actually spoke, another odd feature of the Twilight Ocean Zac had read about. Sound traveled just fine in the liquid, though voices appeared slightly muted.

“Good catch, a Draugr! I’m sorry, but you will have to become fertilizer for my pa—HEURK!” The man didn’t get any further, as a black chain exploded out of the sandy ground and wound itself around his leg.

The next moment he was dragged like a ragdoll toward Zac, who’d already summoned [**Rakan’s Roar**] and activated [**Gorehew**]. The man flailed about as he tried to stop the chain, and he even managed to launch an extremely powerful stab at the black links of [**Love’s Bond**]. Unfortunately for him, Zac had infused the chain with the Fragment of the Coffin, allowing it to withstand the attack.

A haze of blood spread through the area as two pieces of a decapitated corpse slowly landed on the ocean floor. Zac shook his head in reproach, quickly looted the corpse and his Spatial Ring, then ran away. He should have known the contribution value of cultivators wouldn’t be visible unless he actually spotted targets, making it useless as a way to prevent ambushes.

Luckily, the attacker was most likely some young lordling who had never been in a real struggle of life and death. His power wasn’t too bad. Both his Restrictive Skill and the proficiency he’d displayed when striking his fetters were respectable. It was his actual combat experience that was utterly lacking.

What kind of fool stops to talk in the middle of a death match? It allowed Zac to send a chain into the ground and ambush the spearman right back. Zac would have defeated him soon enough, but it would have wasted time. And any second wasted was another moment a real powerhouse might target him.

It was a good reminder of how dangerous things could get even out in the seemingly empty water. The weaker cultivators were definitely just trying to hide and survive, while the more powerful and ruthless people took advantage of the early chaos to gather some wealth and contribution points.

At least he gained 102 contribution points from the lesson, indicating that Zac should be in the upper part of his value

span of 100–250. After all, Zac doubted the young lordling had anything better than a Middle-stage Dao Fragment. Otherwise, he wouldn't have fallen so easily.

A large amount of Miasma stormed into the skill fractal for the movement skill on his chest, and the world inverted after almost two seconds had passed. He had activated [**Abyssal Phase**] multiple times by now, but he was still filled with marvel as he felt his incorporeal form. He could barely be considered a ghost at the moment, rather a congregation of Miasmatic Energies.

Activating the skill normally didn't take him to that ancient darkness for a moment, the skill just turned the world monochrome. This time, there were some differences from his earlier experiments. The Twilight Ocean had an interesting effect on his augmented vision.

When he'd used the skill in his courtyard, everything mostly stayed the same, except objects looked like they'd turned into energy. The effect even allowed him to see through walls to some extent, but not pass through them. Here, things had undergone a more drastic change.

Some plants and stones on the ocean floor shone like small beacons, while other items were so muted they almost seemed invisible. Other features on the seafloor were mottled as though full of faults and holes. Zac quickly realized what was going on.

Some of the items in the Twilight Ocean were like certain trees in the Dead Zone. They had an extremely pure aura of life even when surrounded by death. Similarly, some plant life and even materials only retained half of the Twilight Energy, expelling the other half. And the purely life-attuned materials around him had turned extremely bleak when he entered his current form.

It was pretty interesting, being almost the opposite of his normal Draugr vision, where life force was clearly visible unless it was masked. Still, Zac's current main goal was to get away before more powerful warriors arrived. His blob of energy pushed through the seemingly frozen water with

amazing speed, each second taking him over five hundred meters from his original position.

Only when he'd moved ten kilometers from where he fought did he stop. There were no powerful signatures around, so he returned to his corporeal form. With a flash, the world returned to normal, and a scan indicated he really was alone. Unless someone could hide from his Peak-mastery [**Cosmic Gaze**]. Zac activated [**Spiritual Anchor**] to scan his body just in case and found the spear wielder hadn't left any brands on him before dying.

Only then did Zac keep moving, this time working even harder to mask his aura. In normal situations, he would do the opposite and blast his killing intent to keep opportunists at bay. In this place, he felt that might have an opposite effect. Seemed a better idea to move along the lush, underwater growth while masking his aura.

Even then, Zac was attacked twice in the following ten minutes among the corals and rocky outcroppings, and the attackers were actually both undead. One of the battles ended with a Corpselord getting trapped and bisected by [**Blighted Cut**], and the second attacker fled the moment he realized he'd taken on someone far too powerful.

Zac snorted in annoyance but didn't pursue. The attacker's contribution value was marked as 50–100, and Zac wouldn't follow him toward dry land for something like that. The previous two targets didn't possess many valuables except their equipment and pills, and a few top-quality healing pills. He kept moving, ignoring most people he saw in the distance.

Four hours passed, during which Zac found himself embroiled in eight consecutive battles, including one where he was forced to trap the attacker inside [**Profane Seal**] before using an escape talisman. It wasn't that Zac was completely overmatched. She was pretty powerful and had activated some sort of communication crystal. It was better to get out of there before he found himself besieged.

Finally, Zac closed in on Catheya's location. She'd been steadily moving out from the shore at a middling pace, which

no doubt was the best option considering how hectic things were on land. He was moving farther and farther away from the starting continent and could still sense energy eruptions every single minute from desperate battles on the shores.

His ranking had steadily dropped over the past hours, and he was currently relegated all the way to #64,334. Part of it was no doubt thanks to the constant flow of participants. He guessed some had also passed him by through slaughter. He'd only started with a bit over six thousand contribution points, and had already made five hundred points without even trying. Some fiends had probably accrued thousands of points by this point.

The best bet for Catheya's group was to keep a decent pace in the first days and create some distance from the general mob. A tactic that increased the odds of running into other powerful squads. Zac doubted too many of the elites wanted to go all out on the first day, even with the allure of contribution points in front of them. Even if they won, so what?

They might be forced to use up their aces with three years remaining in the trial. Besides, even if you planned on climbing the ranks through slaughter, it was better to wait a few months and gain Twilight Fruits from the kills. For now, innumerable treasures were waiting in the depths, and it was more important to gobble them up and gain power-ups before targeting others.

Zac spotted his employer, who leisurely moved among the corals with a string of twelve frozen corpses forming a trail behind her. The Titan Revenant, Qirai, had caught up to Catheya, and she grinned at Zac like she'd won some sort of competition.

"You're here. That's pretty quick." Catheya smiled. Zac only grunted as he looked at the corpse sculptures.

"What's this?" Zac asked curiously.

"Some deterrent and early contribution collection." Catheya laughed. "Besides, I saw a few good bodies on the way and decided to snatch them. Don't you know it's best to perform repairs and alterations immediately after the Dreamers

fall? Their bodies hold lingering spirituality, which helps the process even after their souls have departed.”

Zac nodded as if that was a matter of course, though he was a bit surprised. He'd always thought it didn't matter. Some of his followers had been kept in his Corpse Sack for years until Zac got his hands on the methods to turn them into undead followers.

Then again, Zac's method of raising followers was definitely not part of the orthodoxy. While other Liches and morticians used all kinds of secret methods to restore and even improve the bodies of their followers, Zac had the power of pure Creation.

Catheya obviously wouldn't have this kind of cheat-like ability, and it instead looked like she had added talismans and engravings onto the frozen bodies. Taking in the scene, Zac felt he could finally confirm her class. It had to be related to ice, one of the three great heritages of the undead.

It wasn't a surprise considering her master's show of force, but it was still good to know what he was dealing with in case things went south.

As for the arrays covering the bodies, Zac had a feeling they weren't for healing purposes, considering the bodies appeared mostly fine, but rather more for modifications. Zac wished he could learn the methods if that really was the case. It might be too late for his original batch of Einherjar, but how would someone like him ever lack bodies to turn into followers?

“You know, it's considered rude to try to glean the modifications of others,” Catheya said with a raised brow, noticing Zac studying the inscriptions.

“If it bothers you, you can throw a tarp over them.” Zac shrugged, but he still turned away.

“No class,” Qirai muttered angrily, and was about to say more when, as one, the group became eerily still and looked in the same direction.

“What happened?” Zac asked with surprise. “One of the connections broke.”

“Ravan fell,” Catheya said, confusion written all over her face.

“That fool had the guts to lust for the Perennial Vastness Token, and he didn’t even make it off the shore?” Qirai blurted with incredulity.

“He was strongly recommended by the local branch. Ravan is somewhat renowned for both his survival and offensive capabilities, which is why I recruited him. The clan even provided him with several High-quality talismans as part of his remuneration. He must have been unlucky to have run into someone way too powerful for him to fall like this,” Catheya muttered. “Well, bad fortune is part of life.”

“The trial is a bit bloodier than I expected,” Zac commented.

“It’s essentially a slaughter trial as well,” Catheya agreed with some helplessness across her face. “We might meet more resistance than I expected along the way.”

“Will the plan still work?” Zac asked with a frown.

“Every person we lose will increase our workload a bit. The strain right now is negligible, but in a few months, it will be extremely taxing without my array. If we lose another one, we might have to enlist or enslave some new members,” Catheya mused. “For now, let’s keep moving.”

Zac nodded and the trio set out. The appearance of two pureblood Draugr and a Titan thankfully deterred any more attempt of attack, which only served to annoy Catheya a bit. However, she ultimately chose to give up on collecting any more corpses, which was a pretty big relief to Zac. It wasn’t really that he was worried about getting himself in trouble, but it proved that Catheya was at least not completely impulsive and temperamental as a leader.

He’d heard too many stories about young scions with overblown egos kicking up all kinds of trouble while out exploring. They might be fine because their elders had stocked

their bags full of life-saving treasures, but what about their followers?

The group moved at a brisk but not frantic pace, and the fourth member arrived after twenty minutes. Sharpo, the spectral cultivator, was essentially unscathed. Zac wasn't surprised at their Mentalist scout being able to make it through the culling without much problem. Zac was more surprised to see Yod appearing an hour later, looking mostly fine.

He was the second Corpse-lord of the group apart from the fallen Ravan, though Zac had only heard him speak two times. From what Catheya had explained over the past week, he was essentially an undead Paladin, or perhaps more of a Shaman like Emily. He focused on both protective and healing skills, making him a welcome member of any team.

Another two hours passed, and Catheya started to display some worry. Zac understood she was thinking about Varo, the final missing member of the group. Thankfully he arrived forty minutes later, though he sported grisly wounds across his body.

His robes were completely ripped apart, and he formed a trail of black ichor in the water behind him. Yod wordlessly stepped forward, and a dark cloud surrounded the Revenant. The cloud didn't disperse so much as burrow into Varo's body. The skill looked a bit like Zac's [**Winds of Decay**], but was obviously a healing skill since Varo almost immediately looked better.

"I'm sorry about the delay," Varo said after giving Yod a small bow. "I was ambushed by a group. I am afraid I had to expend one of the aces mistress prepared to escape."

"It's fine," Catheya said with a smile. "We're all here now. Let's set out. It's a long journey to our destination."

"Can you finally tell us where that is?" Zac asked. "You've kept us in suspense for months now."

"Well, no," Catheya said with a wink. "It wasn't easy for my master to hire a Numerologist to divine the location of the Life-Death Pearls and the route to get there. I can't just give

the information away, right? But our first stop on the journey is Cork Island.”

CLASHING SEAS

Zac wasn't too surprised about the first destination being Cork Island. The Twilight Ocean shared the same odd feature as many other Mystic Realms that were actively managed by the System. It was randomized between trials, just like Earth upon the integration. However, a lot of features were constant even after the randomization, and Cork Island was one location that always appeared somewhere in the early parts of the Twilight Ocean.

People had tried for ages to create vessels that worked in this odd place, but they were either restricted by the System or simply didn't work while submersed in the mystic waters. But the trial zone was simply too big to randomly travel around by foot. People had found some workarounds. One was to jump into the powerful streams that passed through the Mystic Realm.

Another way was to build vessels with the help of prefabricated runes and locally sourced materials.

The trees at Cork Island were quite popular as a material for making underwater vessels. The trees had a diameter of up to twenty meters, which allowed you to hollow one out and create roomy submersibles. Even better, the thick bark both had strong defensive properties while also isolating some of the Twilight Energies permeating the air.

Finding Cork Island and building a vessel would give you a leg up against the competition. Though it wasn't the only solution found over the ages. Rocks, shells, corals, even large beasts had been turned into all kinds of odd submarines that

only worked in this world. A few even managed to create flying vessels, but those were less popular, as over 90% of the valuables were hidden in the depths of the ocean.

“How come Cork Island instead of the Monolith Forest?” Sharpo asked with a hollow voice, which gave Zac a start. “Why are we traveling along the Living Pulse?”

It was a good question, and one Zac would have thought to ask if he didn't still think from the perspective of a human. Cork Island was a pretty decent spot but it was ultimately preferred by the living factions, being filled with trees. The undead factions gravitated more toward unliving materials such as the stalagmites the ghost mentioned.

Neither material was better than the other. The risk of being caught up in a conflict was merely lower if they aimed for the Monolith Forest instead.

As for the Living Pulse, it was one of the more famous underwater currents. This one in particular, had been given the name the Living Pulse since it could take cultivators to a series of decent opportunities for the living. It was pretty dangerous, requiring both knowledge of the stream and some defensive means.

The pulse was often erratic, lashing out with force even exceeding the E-grade. Similarly, there was a Death Pulse that passed by the Monolith Forest. Both pulses lead into the outer waters, where the group could start looking for the Life-Death Pearls or continue toward the Twilight Chasm.

“That's the path the esteemed Numerologist found for us.” Catheya shrugged. “Don't worry. Those who reach that place as quickly as we will are more focused on reaching the depths of the ocean than fighting it out with other groups. We only need to be careful after having built our vessel in case someone wants to snatch it.”

“What's the matter, ghost?” Qirai grinned. “Didn't we come to this place to hone ourselves? Barging through the Living Pulse sounds a lot more exciting than going the other way. It's the path of the elite.”

Sharpo didn't respond nor inquire further, and neither did Zac. However, he knew the explanations were mostly excuses. He was willing to bet his right arm that this route had something to do with the additional mission of Catheya's, the one he'd been enlisted to help out with in return for dealing with the Veilplume Monarch.

Zac wasn't overly worried about heading to the Living Pulse. If things went downhill, he could always use his escape talismans and swap to his human form, blending in with the living. The array that hid his Duplicity Core would lose its efficacy for a month, but that didn't really matter now that he was inside the Mystic Realm.

Of course, he didn't want to use his Specialty Core unless necessary. The System shielded others from looking inside, but who knew if the brand he had been marked with was recording his actions. If possible, he wanted to rid himself of that egg along with the brand before swapping between races.

"Alright, the quicker we move, the less likely it is for trouble to appear," Catheya said. "Let's go. Feel free to pick up loot on the way, but don't cause trouble for the others."

The group sped up after sinking to the ocean floor. They spread out a bit with Catheya in the middle so they could trawl a thin stretch of seabed for valuables. Zac didn't find anything interesting over the first two hours, but eventually spotted an odd plant that looked like a tall gray coral with gray seaweed resembling palm leaves growing from it. It didn't appear very exciting, though he sensed some spiritual fluctuation hidden beneath the long gray leaves.

Zac shot forward, feeling he'd finally found something of value. Only, he wasn't the only one, as Qirai blasted forward with enough force to cause a small whirlwind in the water behind her. Titan was surprisingly quick and they reached the plant at the same time.

"Mine," Qirai said while trying to stare down Zac. He snorted and ripped up the plant by its roots and threw it into his Spatial Ring.

“Keep to your own lane, Titan,” Zac spat, which caused the aura of Qirai to veritably explode as she took a threatening step forward.

“Alright, that’s enough, you two,” an exasperated voice reached them, followed by the waters freezing. “No need to fight over one little fruit. You need tens of thousands to get a chance at a decent spot on the ladder. Everyone gets a two-kilometer berth. And Arcaz, don’t rip out the whole tree. Just pluck the fruits. Don’t you know about the rules of conservation?”

Zac nodded as he glanced in the direction of Catheya, but he didn’t take the tree out. It had already been harvested and would probably not survive even if replanted. Qirai glared one last time at Zac before she flashed away, her movement skill causing a massive shockwave that even pushed Zac a few steps back.

A small smile crept up along Zac’s lips as he looked at the Titan swimming away in a huff. He wondered if the Titan Revenant’s predecessor was so irascible that it carried over through the awakening or if it was just something hardwired into their muscles.

“According to my calculations, we’ll reach an area where we can jump onto the pulse in a bit under two weeks,” Catheya’s voice continued, and Zac realized it came from a small ice crystal that floated next to him. “In total it will take almost three months to reach the inner layer. You two only need to cooperate until then. After we’ve farmed our pearls, we can go our separate ways.”

“No worries.” Zac smiled. “People always compliment me on how well I get along with others.”

“Somehow I doubt that.” Catheya laughed through the ice crystal, after which it melted and blended into the waters.

Zac didn’t immediately set out, instead waiting a few seconds before he took out the coral-like tree and harvested the Twilight Fruit. This was his first time getting a good look at it in person. It didn’t look like much, just a gray peach-like fruit. However, the reason why he was ready to come to blows

with Qirai over this Low-tier item wasn't because of any goals related to the Fate-Plucking Ladder.

After almost four years, he'd finally found an item that elicited a response from **[Love's Bond]**.

The reaction was small, but it was definitely there. Alea wanted something from this tree, and it only took a few seconds to confirm it was the fruit itself. Zac's heart beat in anticipation as he pressed the fruit against his amulet, and a smile spread across his face as it drained in an instant, leaving a husk behind.

This discovery was huge and brought even more excitement than the ability to ward off the Twilight Energy. He had no idea why Alea wanted the Twilight Fruits, but he thought it might be related to its reconciliatory effects. The items he'd used when forming **[Love's Bond]** had ultimately been a mixed hodgepodge of things he'd had at hand.

Perhaps the fusion between her soul and the Spirit Tool wasn't perfect because he hadn't properly prepared all the materials. After all, while the **[Divine Investiture Array]** would create an item without flaws, it was still ultimately dependent on the materials put into the process.

Now that his horizons had been broadened, it didn't feel like he had spent a fortune on the formation of **[Love's Bond]**, but rather almost like he shortchanged Alea. But finally, he had a way to start improving her situation. Besides, if Twilight Fruits could help her, who knew what else in this place would also work.

The only downside was the implications this discovery had for his ranking on the Fate-Plucking Ladder. But between some random treasure from the Twilight Vault and helping Alea while upgrading his Spirit Tool, he would obviously choose the latter.

The group kept an unrelenting pace for five whole days, not spending even an hour resting. Catheya wanted to break away from the main pack, and no one had any complaints. They were still embroiled in over thirty altercations, though

more than half of the clashes ended immediately when neither side could gain an easy advantage.

Those who kept at the edge of their formation were those who usually got ambushed, so they kept a rolling scheme. After a time, Varo and Sharpo had to give up on treasure hunting and instead accompany Catheya because of the pressure, leaving the other three to shore up their defenses. It wasn't really that they were weak, but their skill set leaned in different directions.

Yod was essentially a healer, so it mostly came down to Qirai and Zac to protect their flanks, with Catheya providing support if needed. Qirai essentially took it as a challenge on who could gather the most contribution points. Zac didn't mind either, since it gave him a wider berth to collect Twilight Fruits, and the occasional attack provided both loot and contribution points.

Over the next five days, Zac managed to rack up another 1,371 points from fourteen kills, which was slightly below the Titan. Of course, Zac would have reached a higher number if he'd fought a bit harder, but he didn't want to expose his stronger attacks this early. He usually tried to ensnare any enemy who got close, but he purposefully didn't pursue if they got too far.

What was interesting was there didn't seem to be any hard or fast rules to the contribution points each trial-taker provided. He'd fought one who clearly had a death-attuned Fragment, but he only got 18 contribution points from that person. Conversely, he got a whopping 281 points by killing a treeman who seemed to have a Dao Fragment that was a mix of the Seed of Trees and Seed of Gust.

Part of the value definitely came from the stage of the Dao, and the other part from something else. The quest was to perfect the Tapestry of Twilight, and Zac guessed some insights were valued higher than others when it came to kills.

Even with all those kills and searching high and low, he'd only managed to collect seventy-four Twilight Fruits, a pathetic number. The large number of kills put him at the

threshold of gaining another level, but he reluctantly chose to wait. He had his **[Stone of Hope]** and **[Chainbreaking Pills]**, but this was no time to test their efficacy. His body was still on the mend from forcing his way through eight consecutive levels, and bursting a node at this point might get him killed.

If not by his own doing, then by the attackers who were everywhere in the waters.

At the end of the fifth day, Catheya finally called for a break, and the group gathered in a hidden cave at the bottom of the ocean. Zac felt he could keep going, until he recognized that the others were in a bad way.

Sharpo looked a bit dim, and Yod had a small frown on his face. Even the hulking Titan was a bit deflated after the marathon, though it wasn't surprising considering how she'd constantly fought. She didn't have his luxury of a hidden node purifying the energies for her. Only Catheya looked like Zac, in somewhat good spirits. She erected a series of High-quality arrays that hid the cave and their auras, along with both a diversion and killing array.

The diversion array was a type of illusion that made people subconsciously look over an area and avoid it because they were made to feel it held nothing of value. If someone still forced their way here, the killing array would probably make short work of them considering the quality it held.

"This cursed energy," Qirai muttered as she crushed a Miasma Crystal. "It feels like I'm covered with burrowing maggots."

The energy released from the crystal purified the Titan's surroundings for half a minute until it was assimilated by the ambient energy.

The density of Twilight Energy had increased a bit over the past five days, as they were leaving the starting continent behind, but it was still well within what his body could handle. He might as well have been walking in one of the Dead Zones back on Earth thanks to the combined efforts of his hidden node and the whirlpool in his soul aperture.

As they had traveled the past days, Zac constantly monitored the situation in his mind. Continuing his soul cultivation toward the second reincarnation was one of his goals in coming to Twilight Harbor. His most optimistic estimates had initially indicated he might reach the threshold within a decade. Now it looked like he might reach the second reincarnation much earlier than expected, judging by the changes in his soul aperture.

This was as good a time as any, and since the others needed to rest for a few hours, Zac had some time to see if his new arrays worked in this environment. He walked off to a corner of the cave, ignoring their curious looks, and started infusing mental energy into the array disk he took out. His eyes lit up when Twilight Energy started streaming into the array, but he sighed when his surroundings became almost desolate after ten minutes.

“Not a bad array,” Catheya commented from the distance. “Though it’s not possible to keep the Twilight Energy permanently at bay that way.”

Zac looked over with some confusion, but he soon understood what it must look like. He took out two Supreme Miasma Crystals and crushed them, which drowned the area in Miasma. One single Supreme Miasma Crystal held as much energy as roughly ten High-quality Miasma Crystals, and the whole cave was inundated in death for over fifteen minutes before balance was restored.

“Just wanted a breather.” Zac smiled after he returned to the group.

“More money than sense,” Qirai said, clearly with some jealousy. The crystal she’d crushed earlier was just of Medium-quality—an E-grade Miasma Crystal as it would have been called back in the Zecia Sector. The effect it had on their surroundings was unsurprisingly a shadow of the Miasma storm Zac had caused.

“Thank you,” Sharpo said from the side, looking a little better than before.

Zac smiled and closed his eyes, going over the results of the experiment. The cultivation method for the second reincarnation was pretty straightforward and very much the same as the first one. He would infuse his mental energy into the array disk and it would temper his soul.

The good news was that the Twilight Energy was usable as a fuel, but the ambient energy in the outer parts of the ocean was far too insufficient to do the trick. He'd barely managed to start cultivating before the area was drained, which was a testament to how power-hungry the process was.

More importantly, Zac felt he'd gained some insights into the process itself. The first reincarnation tempered him by causing clashes between life and death around his soul. He'd only managed to send a trickle through the array this time, but it was still passed through the whole array and returned into his mind.

Zac had obviously taken out the array disk that utilized Deathly Dao since he was sitting right in front of six undead cultivators, and what had been returned was a marginally deathlier mental energy. However, the energy hadn't floated around in his soul aperture, but rather entered the death-attuned soul sea.

The change was even more negligible than the addition of the purified Twilight Energy, but Zac sensed the ocean got slightly rowdier after the infusion. He guessed this was how the process would look. Each revolution would bolster the oceans in his mind, and by the time he had infused both oceans, he would have caused a full-fledged storm in his soul aperture.

The raging seas would clash, and the core in the middle of the oceans would be tempered in turn, like a rock being polished by the raging seas.

TROVE

If the method of cultivating his soul was to cause storms to rage in his mind, then Zac's best guess was that Twilight Energy improved the base power of the storms. The more energy he managed to infuse into the seas, the greater storms would rage, and the faster his soul would be tempered.

That was his takeaway after almost a week of observation, at least. The array only temporarily infused the soul oceans, where the effect of the Twilight Energy was permanent. It did seem like the energy helped expand the ocean by a small degree. More importantly, it improved the quality of the ocean.

It was like Twilight Energy added the insights it contained to the waters, making them more complete representations of Life and Death. The energy in the waters was previously made from the ambient energy in his cultivation cave along with attuned crystals, so the insights they contained were no doubt quite basic.

Only a very small pocket of the deathly had been elevated so far, while more and more Twilight Energy kept pouring in. Sooner or later the oceans would be filled with the insights of Twilight, at which point Zac would probably need to find some other way to combat the suppressive energy around him.

Zac doubted the Twilight Energy was the only method to improve his oceans, and bet he would be able to do the same with various treasures. After all, the vortex that formed didn't seem to have anything to do with his bloodline or class, more so having formed when his soul evolved.

There was no way to tell how many different attuned items he needed to collect, but he felt following Kenzie's lead would be the best. The more he could expand the oceans and the more complete their insights were, the better. In fact, the quality of his second reincarnation might hinge on the quality of the oceans to some degree.

Eventually, the energy from Zac's crystals dissipated, at which point Catheya took out an array sphere that looked extremely intricate. It wasn't hard to guess what he was looking at, the purification array.

"Everyone, get acquainted with this array controller over the next hour. We will constantly depend on this thing in the deeper parts of the Twilight Ocean, and it requires constant attention. We will install a daughter array in the vessel we'll build and take turns controlling it while the others cultivate or look for treasures," Catheya explained.

It was soon Zac's turn, and he was truthfully a bit worried. Catheya had never directly showcased this thing during their meetings, calling its functionality a trade secret. Zac's Dao control was legendarily awful, impossibly so for a Draugr. What if he couldn't even run the array? He reached over to grasp the black orb, and a stream of information entered his mind, which allowed him to breathe out in relief.

Using the array was straightforward enough. You only needed to continuously infuse some Dao and Miasma into it, and the array would do the rest. Zac was a bit surprised a purity array could utilize any sort of Death Dao to run. It did explain why the surroundings changed slightly in flavor when the others tried it out. Zac chose the Fragment of the Coffin and the Miasma in their surroundings changed again. It started to feel extra familiar and soothing to Zac.

There was just a hint of his Dao in the surroundings, but it still somehow transformed the Miasma to fit him even better. However, he was surprised at the expenditure. Even with his massive reserves, he'd be hard-pressed to run the array for a whole day, and he'd be completely wrung dry after thirty hours or so.

Its effect was generally good, with one caveat: it lessened the amount of Twilight Energy to just 20% of its original density, replacing it with Miasma. And since Zac couldn't actually absorb Miasma to cultivate, he was losing cultivation momentum from the array rather than gaining a respite.

Luckily, he would only be under this thing's effect for a few months.

"We'll each run this array for six hours, which will give everyone over a day's rest after their turn," Catheya said. "It's a shame we lost a member the moment we entered this place, but it still shouldn't be too hard on anyone here. You should prepare yourselves. The effect will not be nearly as good in the inner parts of the ocean, where the Twilight Energy is a lot denser."

The group set out after resting for a few hours, and soon settled in the slight monotony of moving across the seemingly endless ocean floor, while occasionally picking up a Low-grade natural treasure or a few Twilight Fruits. Attacks also happened, though they'd grown a lot sparser after a week had passed.

The calm was suddenly broken as an ice crystal appeared next to Zac. "Gather up for a bit." Catheya's voice emerged from the ice crystal. "There's something interesting here."

Zac looked over in her direction, not seeing anything special. She was standing on a small rocky formation covered in corals and seaweed that stuck out of the seabed. It didn't look much different from the hundreds of similar outcroppings Zac had passed over the past two days, but perhaps there was something different about that one?

Zac swam over, increasing his speed a bit by shooting out small bursts of Miasma. Soon the group of six were all gathered, all curiously looking around.

"Look," Catheya said with a smile as she pointed toward a pathway hidden behind a dense patch of seaweed.

"A hidden cave?" Qirai muttered. "Is it a den?"

"Better." Catheya laughed. "It's a trove."

“Oh?” Qirai exclaimed with interest.

Zac gave the dark cavern a surprised, probing stare. This was the first actual trove he'd encountered, unless you counted the castles during the Eastern Trigram Hunt. This was the kind left by a previous generation trial-taker. After all, the death rate of the Twilight Ocean was roughly 50%, which meant a lot of unclaimed bodies and loot considering many deaths came from mutual destruction or fights against beasts.

What happened to fallen cultivators differed. Some who received a lethal wound were able to hang on for a while, using that time to set up an inheritance trial like those back in his Dao Repository. Many feared being forgotten as much as dying, and they didn't want their cultivation journey to end without making the slightest impression on the universe.

Setting up an inheritance wasn't only done out of benevolence though. The System was very much in favor of the custom, and it had already been proven that it sowed positive Karma. Positive for one's descendants and possibly even for oneself upon reincarnation.

After being set up, the inheritance trials were then sanctioned by the System itself, and they then appeared in some following trial depending on what grade cultivator it was meant for.

It wasn't necessary to actively do something for an inheritance trial to form though. The will of a dying Monarch, and sometimes even Hegemons, was powerful enough to impact their surroundings. Their latent will resonated with the Heavens, and a tomb was born, guarded by natural formations affected by the dead cultivator's insights.

A small Hidden Realm might even appear after particularly powerful Monarchs, where cultivators could enter their crumbling inner world in search of treasure. Zac doubted those kinds of realms could be found in the Twilight Ocean, unless some managed to survive since the last C-grade trial.

E-grade cultivators weren't powerful enough to leave such tombs or worlds behind, but the System often arranged something in places like Mystic Realms. There might be a

small trial to get to the treasures, but nothing too special. It was just like how the palaces in the Eastern Trigram Hunt were guarded by barriers that needed to be breached before taking the loot within.

“Why did you call us here?” Zac asked with a raised brow. “Surely it’s not to gloat?”

“So what if I am?” Catheya winked. “But no, we should decide on a system of distribution for troves and inheritances. Just going by finders keepers will be too chaotic in case we need to work together in cracking them open, and it might sow bad blood.”

“What about the auction system?” Qirai suggested.

The auction system was a type of distribution for adventuring groups. The one who found the trove would become the owner, but sometimes they needed help. That would start a bidding war, where the members of the group could sell their services for a percentage of the loot’s value. While the system was fair on the surface, Zac frowned at the suggestion.

“Doesn’t seem good with this composition,” Sharpo muttered, gaining support from both Zac and Yod.

The group was simply too small, and half the group was solely controlled by Catheya. If Zac needed the help of anyone but the ghost scout or the stalwart Corpselord, Catheya would control the pricing.

“Let’s keep it simple?” Catheya suggested. “Either get it yourself or we do it as a group. Eight shares, three to the finder, one each to the rest. Of course, anyone can sit it out.”

“Agreed,” Sharpo quickly said while Yod nodded in agreement.

“Agreed,” Zac muttered.

“Good. This is the first one, so let’s do it together!” Catheya smiled. “It shouldn’t be anything too exciting this close to the entrance, but you never know. People have even found proper inheritances on the starting continent.”

Zac's eyes flickered with interest, and the pendant around his neck grew into its coffin form. This drew the looks of the rest of the group, where they all sized up his Spirit Tool. They'd most likely seen it from a distance as he guarded the flanks, but this was the first occasion they got a close-up.

"This thing is quite unique," Catheya said with interest, not even trying to hide her curiosity. "Definitely a custom job and a good one. Who did you hire?"

Zac only smiled in return, not deigning to comment.

The group entered the tunnel, and Zac looked on as hundreds of small spectral snakes emerged from Sharpo's body. They covered the whole tunnel as they swam deeper, entering every nook and cranny. Zac guessed it was some sort of scouting skill that spotted traps and enemies. He didn't know why the Mentalist's skill was formed like small snakes, though it was possible there might be a poisonous component to her skill set.

It was also possible she could freely control their form and chose snakes to give others the wrong impression about her abilities.

A wave of Miasma emanated from Yod as well, and Zac felt empowered three consecutive times as three runes flashed above everyone's head before disappearing. A quick look at his Status Screen indicated his Strength and Endurance had both been increased by 10%, while Vitality and Dexterity had been boosted by five.

"Power. Healing. Defense," Yod muttered.

This was the first time Zac was actually part of a proper squad of elites. It felt a bit like he was running a dungeon in an MMORPG. The Paladin even provided buffs for the run.

The tunnel led a hundred meters into the seabed, at which point it ended in an opaque barrier. Sharpo was already on it, and the swarm of spectral snakes dove inside. The shield rippled, but didn't prevent the snakes from pushing forward.

A screen appeared in front of the ghost the next moment, displaying a large cavern. There were no signs of any

movement on the other side. Not exactly a guarantee. There was almost always some sort of challenge attached to a trove.

Sometimes it would present itself as some beasts or dangerous plant life that had made their base close to the treasure to benefit from its energy. If that didn't happen, the System would make some sort of arrangement. The Law of Balance required suffering for any reward.

“Alright, let's go,” Catheya said as she glanced at Qirai.

The next moment, a wall of opaque ice grew on Qirai's arm thanks to something provided by Catheya. This type of teamwork wasn't all that rare, but required trust between both parties. For example, Zac definitely wouldn't be comfortable letting Catheya enclose his whole right arm in a block of ice.

It was a pretty smart tactic for a Lich or a Lich-ice mage hybrid like what Catheya seemed to be. It allowed her to arm and empower her underlings on the go. The Titan walked through with steady steps, and the rest followed.

There wasn't much of interest inside. The cave was only a hundred meters across. It reminded Zac of the maw of some enormous beast, as it was covered in sharp stalagmites and stalactites. The only exception was a cleared area in the middle, where an unmoving body lay in front of a large plant. The plant itself was protected by a barrier, and Zac guessed the thing was the guardian of the trove.

As for the unmoving man, he was definitely dead, despite there being nothing outwardly wrong with him. He even looked peaceful. There were small remnants of life force left in his body, which meant he shouldn't have been dead for too long.

“He's fresh. There's still some spirituality left behind. No more than five hours have passed since he fell,” Catheya said thoughtfully, confirming Zac's assumption. “Can't see anything wrong though.”

“Let me,” Sharpo said as she pointed at the corpse.

Five of the spectral snakes burrowed into the corpse's body, leaving no signs of any damage being done to it. They

emerged a few moments later and dissipated into Miasma that rejoined Sharpo's body.

"His soul aperture is cracked, signs of a mental attack," the ghost said after a few seconds.

"My runes provide no help against mental attacks," Yod reminded them.

No one really commented on it, but Zac could tell a few of the others put their guards up to some degree. Zac himself wasn't too worried since he was confident in his mental defenses nowadays. Of course, that didn't mean he didn't push **[Indomitable]** from its passively running state to its max efficiency.

Grinding his mental defense skill had been a pain in the ass and was one of the last skills of Zac's to reach Peak mastery. The simplest way was to have Vilari attack him over and over while he defended, intermixed with meditation and expanding his understanding of the soul.

Still, it was worth the time spent, as the skill had progressed by a huge degree. The first three levels increased the strength of the defenses, but reaching Peak mastery added a fundamental change to the skill itself. Until that point, it'd always been running, and Zac could infuse his Dao and some extra Miasma into it to increase its power by a small degree.

Now **[Indomitable]** had two proper states: passive defenses and active defenses. The passive defenses were just slightly weaker compared to the previous state of the skill. The active defenses, however, cost over fifty times as much Miasma to keep running, but its defenses were over five times greater.

The expenditure wasn't too much for someone like Zac, and he could definitely activate it without worry every time he entered battle. The singular downside was that he could only keep it active ten minutes every hour. At least the passive protections would keep going even after the timer ran out.

"Everyone ready?" Catheya asked as she looked at the barrier. "I think something might change the moment I attack

the sphere.”

Everyone nodded as they readied themselves for battle.

Catheyia pointed forward and conjured a series of small icicles that slammed into the barrier. They weren't hitting it randomly though. They were forming a circle with some sort of constellation within. A moment later, the whole barrier cracked, exposing the Spirit Plant within.

It was an odd underwater tree reaching almost three meters into the air. Instead of a canopy, it had dozens of long vines hanging down like a hairdo, each of the vines ending in what looked like a coconut. The moment the barrier broke, the vines started to shake. A rattling immediately spread through the cave as the coconuts slammed into each other.

The collisions weren't loud, but the sound still reached deep into the recesses of Zac's mind. Thankfully he already had his mental defense skill active., and Sharpo started emitting some sort of ripple that made the sound far less piercing. Without those waves, the danger would at least be twofold.

The echoes kept multiplying among the hundreds of stalagmites, causing them to rapidly increase in fervor. Sharpo appeared unscathed by the barrage, as did Catheyia and Qirai. Yod and Varo seemed to feel slightly affected by the sounds, but it clearly wasn't more than an annoyance for them.

By the looks of it, the dead man must have had below-average mental defenses or he was too slow activating them. Such was the fate of many solitary warriors, even among elites. Very few were without any weaknesses, and it only took one unlucky encounter for their road of cultivation to abruptly end.

It didn't look like the tree had any other methods of attacking, and Catheyia ended things by sending a blade of ice to cut off the plant by its root. The tree was stowed away, and the clashing subsided over the next minute. Hidden within its roots was a mottled Cosmos Sack. Catheyia grabbed it, after which she looked around with a smile.

“Everyone okay?” she asked, inspecting the haul. “Well, that’s our first adventure. I guess a bond has been forged? Let’s hope the rest of our journey will be this smooth.”

MARKED FOR DEATH

There wasn't anything else of interest within the small cave, and the group turned back after Catheya split the meager loot. As expected, there wasn't much worthwhile in the Cosmos Sack except some random wealth. The guardian plant was ultimately more valuable than the trove itself. Those coconuts apparently contained a liquid that could be used in some spirit-related concoctions.

"Alright, let's keep going," Catheya said as they emerged from the trove. "We should reach the pulse within six days. Prepare yourself. Our first real battle might take place there."

The others nodded and spread out, and once more resumed their individual hunt for treasures. Things were rather dull on the ocean bed, until Zac stumbled upon what might be a trove on the third day. It was hidden within a colony of giant clams that lived in a gully he passed.

He gave it some thought and decided to go at it solo. He sent a short message to Catheya, telling her to go ahead before he ripped open the shell of the suspicious clam. Inside was a hidden pathway, something which Zac had only noticed because of his special Draugr sense.

The clam looked like all the others, except it was dead. However, small bubbles emerged from its mouth, which was definitely suspicious. Zac expected a treasure to hide within the shell rather than a pathway. He didn't much care as he made his way down. He soon found himself in a hidden cultivation cave covered in moss and small seaweed.

The only thing remaining, apart from the plant life, was a skeleton sitting on a prayer mat. It had a decent-looking sword in its lap, though Zac was more interested in the Spatial Ring on the skeleton's finger. Spatial Rings weren't anything special in a flourishing place like Twilight Harbor, but also wasn't something that common cultivators would own because of their price.

There should be a decent harvest waiting within.

[Rakan's Roar] appeared in Zac's hand as he inched closer, his eyes peering back and forth for any hint of what kind of danger this place could hold. He was surprised to see the danger was the skeleton itself, as it started to emit a powerful aura that made Zac think of the unfathomable depths of the ocean.

The skeleton rose and swung its sword in a sharp arc that didn't seem impeded by the water. In fact, it was almost like the ocean was pushing the sword forward, increasing its speed rather than acting as an impediment.

Zac countered with a swing of his own, and the waters started to churn from corrosion as Zac activated **[Blighted Cut]**, causing highly corrosive droplets to drip from his axe. The two weapons clashed, and a swirl of water clashed with an outburst of corruption. Zac was pushed back a few steps from the sheer power contained in the skeleton's swing, but he countered by lashing out with the chains of **[Love's Bond]**. The strike launched the skeleton across the cave, and it slammed into a wall with a heavy thud.

He'd anticipated ripping the skeleton apart with the coffin-infused iron links, but neither the corrosive elements of his skill nor the impacts themselves left so much as a mark on the glistening bones. Just how sturdy was this thing? Thankfully, its combat technique was crude. There were hints of water-related Dao along with a brutish force, but the attacks themselves were without any finesse. It allowed Zac to keep up the pressure with little risk to himself.

The basic path of war slowly merged with his fighting style as Zac unleashed an unrelenting barrage of strikes. The

skeleton was strong, though ultimately just a naïve recruit while he was a veteran seasoned through multiple campaigns. How couldn't there be openings to take advantage of? One strike after another targeted joints, vertebrae or other weaknesses. And still the thing seemed completely impervious to his attacks.

A sudden scream of danger made Zac drag himself out of the way with the help of one of his chains, just in time to see a spear of *something* pierce the waters where his head had just been. A tentacle.

Zac looked at the appendage returning to hiding inside the rib cage of the skeleton, and realization dawned. Only then did he notice weak hints of energy and life force along its arms and legs, more tentacles, which almost perfectly blended in with the water.

He was fighting an octopus rather than a skeleton?

He had planned on simply dismantling the thing and praying it didn't possess the ability to reassemble its bones, but it looked like the skeleton itself was just a puppet. The creature inside simply moved its body out of the way when Zac swung his axe, letting the supremely sturdy bones take the hit. It looked like he needed to adjust his tactic a bit. Four chains shot forward, all of them drenched in black tar that profaned the surroundings.

Each chain swung around the skeleton's limbs, but a storm of cutting water blades shot out from the skeleton the moment they tried to latch on. The blades were powerful, but thankfully not powerful enough to harm either Zac or the chains of **[Love's Bond]**. However, they formed a storm around his target, preventing Zac from binding the creature to activate the finishing blow of **[Blighted Cut]**.

The octopus had learned to be wary of the chains from the first lashing.

Still, the chains were not only useful for binding while **[Blighted Cut]** was active, and they kept spewing out more and more corrosive liquid into the cave. He hadn't managed to make much progress with the skill over the past years, but it

had at least reached Middle mastery. The upgrade increased the corrosive properties by a tier while also increasing the cost of keeping the skill active. Obviously, that was a worthy exchange for someone with a massive Miasma pool like him.

The skeleton remained mostly impervious to his attempt to corrode the beast within, since the octopus managed to move away all the tainted water with its ability to manipulate water. Its control in the small cave was too great, and not a drop of it reached its almost intangible body. Zac figured he'd try something else. Something new.

His body started to release a black cloud that spread through the water with rapid speed, taking just a few seconds to fill the whole cave. The illumination from the seagrass and moss was drowned out, replaced by pervasive darkness and the chill of death. Not only that, a sizzling sound echoed.

It almost sounded like he stood in an enormous swarm of cicadas, but he knew the sound was all the moss and even the cave wall being rapidly dissolved. The darkness was filled with decay, which was why Zac summoned it. He figured it would be hard for the octopus to keep the tainted water away if everything became tainted.

Zac could see just fine in the shroud of darkness. The skeleton had been covered from head to toe in water armor in an effort to block out the corrosive storm. It clearly no longer felt as confident and swam toward the exit. A chain lashed at the skeleton as Zac moved to block.

The skeleton still wore the Spatial Ring, and the sword was also a treasure. How could he let the octopus simply leave?

Getting trapped enraged the beast, and it unleashed a furious assault, using both its sword and the skeleton's limbs as weaponry. The pure force in its strikes was nothing to scoff at, and Zac was somewhat on the defensive from the onslaught. It wouldn't have been as bad if he'd activated **[Vanguard of Undeath]**, but the cave was simply too small to freely fight in that state.

Still, there was no such thing as passively defending for his Fetters of Desolation class.

The darkness congealed as Zac felt a drain on his Miasma. Out of it, a wraith wielding a nasty war axe appeared. Its features were obscured by a tattered robe, and its arms were in a state of advanced decay. The axe seemed to be wrought from black metal, and its head was covered in runes that shone in a sinister green radiance that spoke of putrefaction.

The octopus was a beast, and it followed its instincts, likely knowing Zac was the true threat. It provided the opening the wraith needed, and it unleashed a massive two-handed swing. A small green fractal edge appeared in front of the axe-head and cut straight through the water armor.

The octopus reacted at the last moment and moved to intercept with its arm. The axe wraith was unable to cut through the bone, and a storm of water pushed it away. But the wraith didn't completely lose out on that exchange. A series of small green runes covered the previously transparent tentacle.

A high-pitched wail of pain screeched from within the skeleton's skull. Zac wasn't surprised. Those runes had already started absorbing the corrosion of the surroundings, and the water armor couldn't protect against that. For the octopus, it probably felt like its limb was rotting off. The wraith floated back, but the octopus was in no mood to fight.

It knew it couldn't pass by Zac, so it swam to the opposite side of the cave, all while one of its tentacles sizzled. Unfortunately for the octopus, there was no escape from Zac's cage, and another wraith appeared out of nowhere, launching an attack on one of the legs. Another set of green runes appeared, and the wail from within the skull grew louder.

The octopus was no doubt going insane from the pain, and sometimes pain brings strength.

The blue sword ripped through the darkness, cutting Zac's domain apart in an attempt to destroy the two wraiths. The first one didn't have time to react and was ripped apart in an instant, unable to withstand such a suicidal move. The original wraith, which was about to catch up, dodged the wide swing before countering with an attack of its own. It slammed into

the very same arm as before, and the green runes grew even denser.

A lightning-quick kick from the skeleton dispelled the wraith, but a third one appeared to take its place. As for Zac, he was happy to observe the effect of his recently fused skill. The octopus should be in the late stages of the E-grade, and it had found itself an extremely durable skeleton for protection. Which made it pretty good target practice.

Zac could manually control the skill, but he was happy just to observe as they slowly became smarter during the fight. Soon enough, there were two of them harassing the octopus, and when there were three, things started to become lopsided. The axe wraiths worked in tandem, with one drawing attention while the other two stacked more and more corrosive runes across the skeleton and its controller.

Three wraiths eventually turned to five, at which point the beast was already on the brink of collapse. It had lost most of its tentacles, and the skeleton now simply floated in the air with its arms hanging down. The octopus was on the brink of death, and Zac sensed the familiar energy emanations of self-destruction.

Four chains shot forward like spears, each targeting cracks or openings in the skull. A surge of energy entered Zac's body a moment later, confirming that he'd managed to kill the beast hiding inside.

The darkness that suffused the cave dissipated, and Zac noticed that over a meter of the wall had been completely corroded, leaving behind a smooth surface. Zac nodded in satisfaction at the scene, feeling that his new skill lived up to his expectations. The skill was called **[Deathmark]**, and was the fusion of **[Deathwish]** and **[Winds of Decay]**.

[Deathwish] was one of Zac's favorite skills in his undead tool kit, but it had unsurprisingly fallen behind. The spectral projections had a ceiling strength that wasn't a threat to most E-grade cultivators. Furthermore, its method of activation wasn't really suitable any longer. It was originally meant to be

used in conjunction with **[Immutable Bulwark]**, but Zac now barely fought with a shield.

He didn't want to keep getting hit to activate the skill, so he needed to change its trigger. Doing so through modifying the fractal was probably possible, but that was still out of his reach. So **[Deathwish]** became his first choice for a fusion, and he'd considered **[Vanguard of Undeath]**, **[Fields of Despair]**, and even **[Profane Seal]** as potential targets.

But ultimately, he landed on **[Winds of Decay]**. His idea was for **[Deathwish]** to represent the Fragment of the Axe, which was why the spectral projections had been replaced by axe wraiths, and for **[Winds of Decay]** to represent death. The result was **[Deathmark]**, a domain skill that both spread powerful corrosion while adding the summoning ability.

One impressive difference between the old skills and the new was that the new wraiths didn't actually disappear after one strike. They would keep pelting away for half a minute unless they were destroyed by the enemy, each strike leaving a mark that rendered the target more susceptible to the corrosive domain.

Even better, Zac didn't actually need to be attacked for the wraiths to appear. As long as the target was within his corrosive domain, more and more would keep popping up. However, the rate at which they naturally formed was just half compared to how quickly they could form as a result of Zac getting hit.

The skill still synergized very well with **[Vanguard of Undeath]** and its taunting ability. As long as he could force his enemy to focus on him through that mental manipulation or pressure alone, the wraiths would keep multiplying and increasing the danger for the enemy. Soon enough they'd look like the octopus, completely covered in green runes as they fell apart.

Even if they managed to withstand the powerful corrosion in **[Deathmark]**, they would be assaulted by a blinding pain that impeded most people's ability to bring out their full power. You could even say the soul-wrenching pain was

another type of restriction, one that might work even better than a suppression array in battle.

You could probably cleanse the mark, but that was like expelling foreign Dao that had invaded their body. Doing so in the middle of a fight could prove lethal. It wasn't like Zac would always watch on while his wraiths fought his battles for him. He had multiple ways to harass the target if they tried to remove the brands.

A look around the cave indicated there were no other threats, and he walked over to the skeleton. Its pristine bones had finally turned a bit mottled after being assaulted by the corrosive domain for half a minute, but they remained whole. Zac didn't care about the skeleton, and instead dragged out the remains of a small octopus from the skull.

Its main body was a bit golden rather than translucent like its appendages, and was a mess now after being impaled by four corrosive chains. Only its maw was still intact, and it bit down on a small stone that emitted pretty powerful energy fluctuations. Zac's first thought was that it was a Beast Core, but he soon realized it had to be a Cosmic Core.

No wonder the bones of the cultivator were so sturdy. They came from a fallen Hegemon that had become nourishment for the octopus. The core itself was more than halfway drained, which helped push the octopus all the way to the Late E-grade. Zac could probably absorb the remaining energy through **[Void Heart]**, but he was loath to do so.

It felt a bit close to cannibalism, and he already had hundreds of Beast Cores prepared for that very purpose. After all, Beast Cores weren't all that expensive, considering they were mostly useless for cultivators because of their chaotic energies. They weren't even efficient energy sources for bombs, since the explosions were extremely unpredictable.

Ultimately, they were mostly used as fertilizer in top-tier gardens. You'd bury a couple of cores of a suitable element and they would slowly infuse the ground with energy over the years. That meant they were in high demand for certain elements that matched well with plants, whereas many other

types of Beast Cores had almost no demand. A beastmaster could use them as food for their beasts, but there were more suitable treasures for that. Like the gems he'd found in the underworld.

Zac's hidden node didn't care what element it ate, so Zac had paid a measly 50 million Nexus Coins for Early-stage Beast Cores back in the Zecia Sector. With his Race Upgrade dealt with and both pills and **[Stone of Hope]** bought, he was pretty eager to start using them. Although, it would have to wait until he reached immunity to the pills he'd brought.

The Hegemon skeleton went into his Spatial Ring, while his ring went on one of Zac's free fingers. He didn't linger in the hidden cave, leaving after having scanned the small chamber a few times for hidden compartments or pathways. It really looked like the Spatial Ring was the only thing of value, and Zac was soon moving across the seabed again to catch up with the others. He soon caught up, at which point his attention turned to the ring.

Even a poverty-stricken Hegemon should have some stuff that was useful for him.

CORK ISLAND

The skeleton's Spatial Ring was in a pretty bad state, and Zac guessed it wouldn't last more than a few more decades. It had probably lost more than three-quarters of its original space by now, and what remained was far smaller than even the backup rings he'd bought in Twilight Harbor.

The contents were left in a chaotic jumble that Zac started to organize into piles, something that had become a lot easier since his control over mental energy got stronger. It became apparent that the previous owner had fought a few life-and-death battles before dying himself, as the items appeared to have come from at least five different people.

There were four sets of cultivation manuals, all of them of different elements. There was a Body Tempering Manual as well, but it was locked just like the manuals were. Hopefully, he would be able to decode them through some service, since these manuals were most likely all things that could be used all the way into the D-grade.

Even if they were average in other aspects, that alone made them better than 95% of the manuals currently available in Port Atwood. Apart from the manuals, there were over fifty bottles with pills, but almost forty of them had golden runes emblazoned on them. It was a seal by the System that locked items of too high a grade until he left the trial.

It was the same with a number of talismans and two Low-grade Cosmic Crystals.

Those crystals were probably left for emergencies, as there were also two small hills of Supreme Nexus Crystals and Supreme Miasma Crystals. The fallen Hegemon was probably among the weaker ones who entered the Twilight Ascent during some previous opening.

All in all, the tally was extremely impressive for an outer trove, though most of the value seemed to be in the crystals themselves. Two Low-grade Cosmic Crystals meant two hundred D-grade Nexus Coins, a shocking haul for most Peak E-grade cultivators. In comparison, the estimated value of the trove Catheya found was just in the vicinity of 120,000 E-grade Nexus Coins.

Unfortunately, there was not a single Twilight Fruit in the ring, which was a pretty big disappointment. By value alone, they were almost a match to the Cosmic Crystals. But more importantly, they might be the perfect food for **[Love's Bond]**. Zac's best guess was that D-grade Twilight Fruits were considered too great a reward and had been removed by the System.

Zac was about to retract his vision, when he spotted a familiar sphere and curiously took it out. He infused some energy into the ball, and soon found himself in an illusion. It actually worked. He wasn't worried about the thing being a weapon or a trap since he had an identical sphere in his own Spatial Ring.

It looked like a metal ball, but it was called an **[Ocean Chart]**. It was a specialized version of his **[Automatic Mapper]** designed to chart the Twilight Ocean. It automatically added in and updated the map as Zac moved along, even while it was in his Spatial Ring. It was one of the first things he'd prepared for the trial, but until now he hadn't had much reason to take it out since it was almost completely blank.

The **[Ocean Chart]** he'd found was completely different, and large swathes were filled in with great detail. Unfortunately, it wasn't much help to Zac, as the whole ocean had been rearranged since then. But Zac did spot something interesting, something that pertained to him specifically.

In a certain part of the middle area of the trial, was an all-too-familiar volcano. The volcano with the Shard of Creation. Zac's eyes lit up, having found the first real clue to the Remnants. The volcano obviously wouldn't be in the same spot as before, but most features stayed at the same general depth.

If the volcano was around the midpoint during a previous trial, there was a good chance it was in the same general area this time around. Even better, there were over five distinctive markers close to it, any one of which might still be connected to the nondescript volcano. The ocean would gradually get charted by the trial-takers, and he would be able to trade for or steal their [**Ocean Charts**] to supplement his own.

Finding the unnamed volcano had just become a lot easier thanks to this map and the clues it provided.

There were unfortunately no clues to the splinter on the map. In the vision he'd had back during the Mystic Realm, it was deep inside a cave hidden among jagged pitch-black rocks at the ocean floor. But he was just one week into the trial and had already made surprising inroads.

Zac had already come to a decision since discovering the Remnants were here. As long as he could find both the locations, he would try to absorb a second set. Collecting more of the Remnants was a huge risk, one Zac felt the potential rewards justified. Making his ultimate attacks stronger was a welcome addition, but he was more interested in the passive effects.

Without the purified energies of Oblivion, it would have taken much longer for his soul to reach the state required for the first reincarnation. He wasn't like Vilari, born with a soul multiple times stronger than the norm. It was the same with his body. The Shard of Creation had kept nurturing his bloodline over the past years.

It was the shard that helped push his [**Force of the Void**] to 27% reserves even without a method to cultivate it. He'd tried eating all kinds of things, but so far he hadn't found much that was of use. Most treasures were simply turned into

Cosmic Energy by **[Void Heart]**, while a few items with strong Spatial Energies seemed to nurture the hidden node to some degree.

Getting a second set of Remnants would mean both faster soul cultivation and body tempering, without Zac actually having to spend any extra time on either. This was also an important experiment to see whether the cage could take on more Remnants. Zac memorized all the features surrounding the volcano, after which he stowed away the old **[Ocean Chart]** to be used as a spare.

Cracking open the first hoard solo was pretty exhilarating, but the excitement quickly died down over the next hours. Troves obviously didn't grow on trees, and Zac didn't really gain much of anything over the next day. He did loot a couple of Twilight Fruits, and Alea showed no indication of being stuffed as she greedily ate any fruit she could get. The monotony eventually ended when another ice crystal formed next to him.

"Everyone, gather," the crystal said. "The Living Pulse is up ahead, which means we're closing in on Cork Island. The risk of ambush is a lot higher here."

The group swam over to Catheya before advancing. The start of the Living Pulse was a small subaqueous mountain range, where the stream emerged out of the depths. From where, no one knew, as going against the current got you ripped apart. The stream was then rerouted through the canyons of the mountain until it turned into a powerful surge that shot through the ocean.

Their group obviously wouldn't get too close to the mountain, since it was a popular gathering spot for adventuring parties. They instead chose a roundabout way, and masked their presence as much as they could. It was hard to miss the Living Pulse even when it was in the distance, as Zac could sense a pure surge of life within the golden haze.

That was a unique point of the Living Pulse. It passed a lot of life-attributed points of interest and was marked by those locations, holding strong life-attuned energies. Perhaps it was

the pulse itself that made those points of interest possible at all. In either case, it made their work easier as they moved along its path toward Cork Island.

They soon spotted the island in the distance, or rather the fact the depth of the ocean kept shrinking. Reaching a sheer mountain wall that went from the ocean bed to above the surface prompted their arrival to the island proper. The Living Pulse actually cut straight through the island itself, but they would have to get onto it.

Sharpo wordlessly sent out a small snake that turned translucent.

“The cliff is forty meters tall,” she said. “I can’t see any cultivators, but my snake can’t see through High-quality illusions. There are some odd fluctuations though, so there might be someone lying in wait.”

Catheyra frowned before she took out a talisman, but before she had a chance to use it, Zac felt a weak push against his mind. He wasn’t even sure if his impression was real, except the ghost and Catheyra seemed to have sensed the same thing.

“We’ve been spotted!” Sharpo said.

“We strike,” Catheyra said. “It’ll be trouble if they expose our group. We’ll take them out before hiding inside the forest.”

Time was of the essence.

“Be careful,” Catheyra said as she nodded at Qirai, who once more took the lead with a massive ice shield on her arm.

The Titan rose through the water like a wall-breaker, while both Zac and Yod followed close behind. Varo and Sharpo disappeared from sight as Catheyra brought up the rear, one icicle after another appearing behind her back.

For a second, Zac thought they were making a mountain out of a molehill. He was almost immediately proven wrong as a storm of golden spears, that made Zac think of Nenotheop Medhin, descended upon them. The ice shield on Qirai’s arm expanded to the size of a building, blocking hundreds of stabs as it was slowly whittled down.

Eventually it broke, and the Titan unleashed a terrifying punch in the same moment, containing enough force to lift the ocean itself, turning an Olympic pool's worth of water into a projectile that shot up toward their attackers. The icicles behind Catheya were launched at the same time and stabbed into the water bomb, turning it into a glacier radiating an immense cold.

A tremendous shockwave erupted above just as they breached the surface, no doubt the ice mountain crashing into whatever defenses the attackers had prepared. The scene above was just utter chaos. Zac could vaguely see a few sources of power with the help of [**Cosmic Gaze**].

'Six people, no first seeds,' Sharpo's voice echoed in Zac's mind.

"Do it," Catheya said with a sinister smile, and the whole area was drowned in darkness like they'd been thrown into the abyss.

Zac sensed the whole world had been sealed off, but he could still see the attackers just fine. In fact, it was like they'd been lit up like spotlights in the dark. It was a domain skill, and while he couldn't confirm it, he believed it was activated by the now-invisible Varo. Zac had always suspected Catheya's staid butler to have something like an assassin's class, and this domain leaned in that direction.

While the others had things in hand, Zac couldn't just sit by and watch this time around. He finished channeling energy into [**Abyssal Phase**], which made it look like the world had frozen in place. Fragments of the ice bomb fell back toward the churning water in slow motion, and Zac effortlessly dodged them, along with several descending attacks, as he made his way toward the cliff where the attackers stood.

It was a mixed group of treants and humans, launching a series of powerful attacks that had almost completely submerged the Titan in a chaotic storm of energies. Qirai emitted odd pulses that kept pushing sharp roots, golden spears, and some sort of radiant blades away like she was

creating a Void Zone around herself. Another ice shield appeared on her hand, helping keep the pressure down.

Qirai was essentially taking on the role Zac himself usually took when fighting with allies: the meat shield. That was just fine with Zac, since he was moving away from the defensive archetype in his undead form. He appeared behind the group and deactivated his movement skill—it was impossible to prepare skills while he was in his intangible form. His axe shot toward the closest throat as it started dripping extremely corrosive liquids.

A two-meter-tall crystal hand appeared to block his strike, and a counter-stab of a golden spear shot toward him before he'd even finished his attack. Zac wasn't worried. He might have moved away from a pure defensive class, but that didn't mean he was without defensive means.

Three pygmy skeletons appeared behind Zac, each radiating such an immense aura of death, the air around them kept distorting. One held a lantern wrought out of bone and a blue flame shone from within. The second held a coffin as large as itself, while the final one was mostly obscured by a black cloud that floated around it as though it were a living thing.

Zac infused a stream of energy into the coffin-bearing pygmy skeleton, and a deathly barrier reminiscent of **[Love's Bond]** sprang up to block the incoming spear. At the same time, the blue light inside the second pygmy's lantern increased in intensity, and the crystal hand deteriorated and fell apart. Zac was already mid-swing by that point, and his axe ruthlessly shot toward the treant cultivator again.

The treant was shocked to find its defenses crumbling so quickly, but he was still a Peak E-grade cultivator. A wall of roots sprang up to block and retaliate, and Zac was cut off from the enemies once more. That was fine with Zac, as that bramble wall had essentially trapped the ambushers with him, putting pressure from behind and Qirai from the front.

He'd already spotted six huge snakes climb up the cliff side, no doubt Sharpo's summoned beasts. They didn't emit

too strong of auras, though were still Late E-grade equivalent. They didn't immediately jump in to tussle with the group of cultivators, but rather helped keep the battle contained and the living trapped in one spot.

Zac couldn't spot Varo or Yod, guessing they were somehow keeping the enemies occupied in other ways. As for Zac, the situation had essentially turned into a battle between life and death. Zac, his four chains, and his lantern-wielding pygmy kept whittling down the barriers while the treant desperately grew new ones in an attempt to overwhelm him.

A huge eruption of force almost threw Zac off his feet, and he sensed that it was Qirai, who'd finally unleashed a massive punch at the defenses the group erected after getting the ambush thrown back in their faces. Of course, Zac didn't plan on giving these people any chance to breathe.

He was utilizing his insights into the Dao of the Axe as much as he could to maximize the damage he caused. He'd usually stayed a human back on Earth, but he had still somewhat integrated his path into his Draugr side as well. Still, it was ultimately a bit lacking, and integrating his warlike movements into his combat style wasn't as smooth as in his human form.

The axe-work was fine, roving back and forth like a furious charge of a deathsworn army. But the patterns of his four chains were still slightly stilted. Zac wanted to use them to keep an ever-present pressure on his enemies, like four raiding parties constantly demanding attention while the main army pushed forward.

As for his fused path of Coffin and Axe, he still hadn't quite found a direction like the Evolutionary Stance he started forming as a human. He did have some ideas on how to fuse death and conflict, but he hadn't landed on anything specific. His goal was to find inspiration during this trial, something that fit his personality and could match the Evolutionary Stance.

For now, he kept using **[Blighted Cut]** rather than **[Gorehew]** in an attempt to shake something loose from the

battle. He figured his odds of figuring something out would increase if he fought with a death-attuned skill imbued with the Fragment of the Coffin while following a combat style based on the Fragment of the Axe.

His axe ripped through endlessly growing plants as pools of Miasmatic corrosion spread beneath his feet. He could have activated his other skills, except he'd pretty much confirmed these people weren't powerful enough to be a threat to Catheya. As for the others, he wasn't as sure. In a sense, this was a chance for him to inspect their strength.

If they got themselves killed against this group of the living, it might be for the best. Otherwise, they'd just become a weakness when they were set against more powerful enemies.

Even with Zac only unleashing a small part of his kit, the treeman soon found himself completely overwhelmed. The biggest problem was the aquamarine flames from the lantern-wielding skeleton. It was just too efficient at eating through defenses, even more so than Zac directly swinging into the barriers with his axe.

A pang of danger erupted in his mind, and Zac looked up in time to see a massive crystal spike descending toward him. It contained an immense aura of life, and golden lightning crackled through its core. Zac frowned and halted his assault for a second, long enough to point toward the spike.

The third pygmy finally made its move as the swirl of darkness around it expanded and rose like a hungry maw. It swallowed the crystal whole, and a moment later, a tremendous shockwave erupted a few hundred meters out to sea as the very same crystal spike slammed into the waters, causing a small tsunami.

The cultivator looked on with blank incomprehension, and Zac only grinned as he once more pushed forward.

PROFANE EXPONENTS

The ultimate strike of the treeman's ally was diverted, allowing Zac to attack with reignited vigor as the normal shield pygmy kept him safe from the occasional attacks. The barriers it conjured resembled coffins, but were actually even sturdier compared to his old skill [**Immutable Bulwark**].

"I need assistance!" the treeman roared with a voice that sounded like dry bark.

There was no time for anyone to come to his assistance before the fight took a drastic turn.

A change that didn't come from Zac.

A small blue flower appeared through a crack in the ground without anyone noticing, and it released a weak, blue light that turned two of the assailants, a mage who held off Sharpo's snakes and the man who conjured crystal hands to protect the party, into frozen statues before anyone had the chance to react. The attackers had already been on the losing end, and losing a third of their party utterly crushed their will to keep fighting.

Qirai took the opportunity when the defensive barriers fell to punch a third cultivator with a lightning-quick jab to her temple. Zac didn't feel it looked overly powerful, but his eyes widened a bit when a sharp spiritual ripple passed through the other side of the cultivator's head. Her eyes completely glazed over, and she slumped to the ground, her soul crushed.

Only now did Zac realize that the brutish Revenant had somehow combined pugilism with mental attacks. It was

probably because of her master not wanting the Titan to destroy the corpses.

Half the party had fallen in an instant thanks to Catheya and Qirai's combo, and the others used their ultimate escape means to get out of there. Zac had already broken through their defenses though, and two chains of **[Love's Bond]** caught the treant mid-teleportation. The man was ripped back to the battlefield and didn't get the chance to try again before he was cut in two by a swing of Zac's axe.

The pieces of bleeding lumber fell to the ground with a heavy thud, and the remains crumbled, landing in the pool of corrosion that spread out around Zac's position.

"I can't believe your master let you get a class like that," Catheya muttered as she rose up to the cliff with the help of a pillar of ice, her eyes drawn to the rotten pool around Zac's feet. "What were you thinking walking the path of Decay? You're harming your own foundation if you keep destroying the bodies of those you defeat."

"I've never had any ambition to become a Lich and raise large armies." Zac shrugged as he picked up a Cosmos Sack before it disintegrated. "And these guys weren't strong enough to become my right-hand men."

"Still, it's like you're burning money," Catheya muttered as she gave the treeman a look of helplessness.

"What about the other two?" Zac asked.

"It's being handled," Catheya said, and barely had time to finish her sentence before Varo returned with two bodies.

Zac hadn't expected the Revenant was powerful enough to deal with both the escapees. Certainly, neither of them was in great shape after the battle, but it hadn't taken more than a few seconds. He'd truthfully somewhat discounted the butleresque Revenant after seeing his performance when they'd gathered together and when they'd entered the trove. Underestimating this guy could be deadly.

"Let's go. We've likely alerted people in the surroundings even if the fight took less than a minute. Some big shots have

probably reached Cork Island already. No need to tempt fate,” Catheya said.

The group nodded and quickly cleaned up the battlefield before they moved farther into the island. Zac threw the treant’s Cosmos Sack over to Catheya, and the others did the same. This had been a team battle, and resources would be allocated dependent on contribution. If they only went by who dealt killing blows, then people like Yod and Sharpo, who filled functions other than directly killing, would be left without a scrap.

The small pygmy skeletons followed Zac for a few hundred meters until they dissipated after bowing in his direction. Catheya looked at the trio curiously before her eyes turned toward Zac.

“An oddity for sure...” She smiled. “I guess they suit you.”

Zac rolled his eyes, but he inwardly agreed with her sentiment. The trio came from the last of his skill fusions, which resulted in a skill called **[Profane Exponents]**. It was the toughest one of all his fusions and the one that differed most from its original skills.

The fusion came from **[Immutable Bulwark]** and **[Undying Legion]**, and they were Zac’s solution to completely overhauling his defensive capabilities. **[Undying Legion]** had grown a lot more powerful having pushed it to Peak mastery. Though the change wasn’t exactly what he’d hoped for.

Reaching High-mastery increased the army to 350 skeletons and added a dozen mages who launched fireballs similar to the turquoise flames of his pygmy. At Peak mastery, the skill conjured 500 skeletons while adding 5 captains and one extremely powerful general who would probably be able to defeat anyone else on Earth by himself.

They would be a mighty force that could aid most defensive cultivators, and **[Undying Legion]** was probably the skill that best personified his path. It combined both death and war in a very palpable way. Unfortunately, that didn’t mean it

really fit Zac's tool kit, and the skeletons were ultimately only used for their damage diversion.

Meanwhile, [**Immutable Bulwark**] was very powerful, but always required him to wield a shield, which didn't suit Zac's taste. He'd much rather use [**Love's Bond**] in its offensive form, using the chains to bind and restrain his enemies as a means of defense through offense.

The result was a new supportive skill that was a lot more flexible compared to his old ones. The first pygmy was simply a pure fusion of the bulwark of his [**Immutable Bulwark**] and the skeletons in [**Undying Legion**]. It became a coffin-bearing skeleton; a representation of his path and Dao of the Coffin that could protect him or groups of people.

The lantern-wielding pygmy specifically targeted defensive skills by corroding defensive fractals. Its weird burning light wouldn't be able to kill most E-grade cultivators. It was on the other hand efficient at eating through defensive arrays and barriers. This pygmy drew inspiration from several sources. Part of it came from the skeletal mages that appeared when Zac upgraded [**Undying Legion**].

A big part of the inspiration came from Kenzie and her array-breaking enterprise.

He'd once asked Kenzie how her Array Breakers worked, and she said a breaker and a barrier were essentially different sides of the same coin. Many of the patterns and runes the two used were the same, merely applied slightly differently. That was what gave him the guts to try having the System repurpose the overabundance of defensive patterns in the two skill fractals into something offensive.

Zac's undying side wasn't like his living one, where he had a few terrifying skills that could destroy all opposition. He was more like a spider trapping his targets in a web, slowly whittling them down until he launched a final strike. However, that combat style held a weakness: time. Anything could happen in a battle, prompting Zac to think of various ways to increase the speed at which he could squeeze his enemies to death.

One route was to get a finisher skill like [**Arcadia's Judgment**], simply turning people to mush. Another way was to destroy his enemies' defenses and allow skills like [**Blighted Cut**] and [**Deathmark**] to work a lot quicker. The result was shockingly effective. Any defense within his domain was quickly targeted and dissolved by the priest pygmy. Zac believed the skeleton would even be able to destroy D-grade defenses when the skill reached Peak mastery.

The third pygmy had taken on the power of displacement from [**Undying Legion**], but its usage was a lot more flexible. It could either transfer damage from Zac to the three pygmies or displace an attack altogether, as it had with the crystal spire.

When used correctly, it could be considered an offensive skill, though the skill ultimately was under the control of the attacker. They would usually be able to dissipate the attack before they accidentally attacked themselves because of the displacement.

"Restrain your auras and follow me," Catheya said as she attached a series of talismans to individual ice crystals that floated above everyone's heads.

Zac didn't exactly understand how they worked, but it felt like their group was somewhat isolated from the surroundings, just like how the distraction array worked. Zac looked at the setup with interest. The way Catheya used her Dao to create mobile array arrangements was pretty ingenious. Perhaps he could do something similar if he could ever gain such control over his Dao.

The trees kept getting larger as they ran deeper into the forest, and they soon overshadowed even the massive redwood trees back on Earth. Any tree would be large enough to be turned into a serviceable vessel, but Catheya kept going deeper for another hour until she stopped close to one that looked a bit sturdier than the others.

She took out a rope with small array disks attached every meter, and Varo started putting it around the base of the trunk. Almost like Christmas lights, except Zac understood it was a specialized array, as the whole tree trunk was suddenly cut off

as the dozens of miniature disks on the rope cracked. The tree didn't even have the chance to tilt before it just disappeared, no doubt placed in a Cosmos Sack of Catheya's.

"Alright. We'll split up here," Catheya said as she took out another small array disk. "There's a hidden shipyard beneath the river somewhere around here. A few of us will start processing and hollowing out the tree while a few others and I continue farther inside."

Varo and Qirai were clearly not surprised by Catheya's statement, but Zac could see that both Yod and Sharpo were caught unaware. Neither of the two had made similar deals as he had. Of course, Sharpo seemed to have already figured something out earlier when they'd discussed the route.

As for Zac himself, he started to feel that the price for the **[Stone of Hope]** might have been even higher than he initially estimated.

"What's going on?" Yod asked.

"I was tasked with a second goal when coming here," Catheya smiled. "I have been ordered to complete a small task on Cork Island. Don't ask why because I don't know."

"I agreed to help, but this place..." Zac sighed as he looked toward the heart of Cork Island.

The Living Pulse ran straight through the middle of the island, imbuing it with a surge of life-attuned energies. The large trees were not the only thing of value in this place, there were also all kinds of treasures. Right now, the heart of the island was in a completely pristine state, and thousands of cultivators no doubt rushed toward the core to harvest the valuables before the mainstream cultivators arrived.

It was truly a no-man's-land for the unliving.

"We're not here to go against the collective strength of the Dreamers," Catheya said with a shake of her head. "We go in, do our thing, and get out. Yod and Sharpo, you can begin preparations in the hidden shipyard with the help of Qirai."

"Safer to go together," Yod muttered, and Sharpo seemed to agree.

“Perhaps. I’m just following my master’s instructions. Initially, three were supposed to remain, and four go, but now we’ll split three-three. Me, Varo, and Arcaz will complete the mission.”

Qirai had clearly been informed already, and she took both the array crystal and a Cosmos Sack from her master, turning to the outsiders.

“Come on, let’s go. The shipyard is some distance away,” she said and started running.

Yod and Sharpo exchanged a glance before they followed the Titan.

“I guess I’m not privy to the shipyard’s whereabouts if things go sideways?” Zac sighed as his teammates disappeared among the trees.

“Well, would you even want to join those three in case things go wrong?” Catheya laughed in response, walking toward the core of the island. “I have a feeling you’d rather stake it out yourself.”

“Do you even know the location of the pearls?” Zac asked with a suspicious glance. “Or are we just toiling in vain for this mystery mission of yours?”

“Of course.” Catheya nodded. “It’s the reward master negotiated for me in return for completing this mission. He said there definitely aren’t any errors in the clues and path he got. There might even be an Autarch involved for him to be so certain.”

“Why you? There are millions of natives who could take up tasks for the undead factions. Why has an imperial like you been given this task?” Zac asked.

Catheya didn’t really need to watch her words now that the two outsiders were gone, and Zac really wanted to find out anything he could about this mission of theirs. He couldn’t directly ask about his own task because of the brand hiding in his body, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t gather clues from Catheya without directly asking.

“Who knows.” Catheya shrugged. “But you know, it doesn’t really matter. The old ancestors at the top will always play their games. Even Hegemons are just replaceable chess pieces to them. And that’s a good thing.”

“Sounds real good,” Zac snorted sarcastically.

“We might be expendable, but also not valuable enough to be specifically targeted. I’ll keep my head down, complete my mission like a good chess piece, and take the rewards and empower myself. One day, I’ll be the player instead of the chess piece.” Catheya smiled. “Such is the way of the world.”

Zac hesitated as he looked toward the center of the island. Perhaps Catheya really didn’t know what was going on. Is this what life was like for those in established factions? Being pawns in schemes beyond their understanding, their lives not under their own control. Everyone hoping to gain control over their own fates one day?

“You saw the auction. Quite a few of the items meant for E-grade cultivators weren’t even sold since not one of the old monsters was prepared to fork out even the minimum bid,” Catheya added. “If you want something really good, you have to work for it yourself. Such is Heaven’s Path. The Boundless Heavens will only help those who help themselves.”

“Not sure if I want the Heavens’ help,” Zac muttered, but he understood her point.

Not every opportunity was a Mystic Realm. Simply being used as a chess piece by big shots could be considered an opportunity since they sat on resources that lower-grade cultivators desperately wanted. Most people didn’t qualify being even a chess piece.

The trio kept a low profile as they pushed through the undergrowth between the towering trees. The forest floor was thankfully quite lush even with the massive canopies hundreds of meters in the air blocking out the sun, thanks to many plants only needing Cosmic Energy to thrive.

They heard the occasional battle in the distance, but Catheya thankfully showed no inclination of heading over to

fish in muddy waters. They did run into a duo of beastkin, a battle that was over before it even started. They were frozen in place in an instant, followed by Zac and Varo each dealing with one before they had a chance to erect their defenses.

Their strength wasn't very impressive. Most likely having pushed themselves to the limit just to reach the island in hopes of getting a few valuable herbs. Even with the environment working against the undead in this place, he and Catheya were pureblood Draugr with one very powerful advantage, their vision.

It was almost like sonar here. Allowing Zac to see others long before they saw him. However, Catheya was somehow able to spot parties long before he did. She didn't seem to use any skills either, leaving him wondering if it had something to do with her race. Catheya had already inadvertently divulged that all Draugr had the same bloodline, and perhaps she'd managed to strengthen her innate abilities through it.

After a time, they approached the core of Cork Island, where a gargantuan world tree proudly towered over its much smaller brethren. It had been visible even through the dense canopies, since it almost split the sky in two. Now that they were getting closer, the trees were growing sparser. Like the world tree had a domain of its own.

Zac hadn't really considered what they were here to do. Now that he got a better look at the unfathomably large tree, he started to form a hypothesis.

"Don't tell me," Zac said as he looked at the enormous tree with a grimace.

"Well, what do you think?" Catheya smiled.

"People are going to be pissed off if we cut that thing down."

OPPOSING SIDES

“Are we really doing this?” Alvaries sighed as she looked down at the seemingly ordinary mountain below. “The implications...”

The Holbok Mountains were situated on a remote part of the Dendrian world disk. None of the Twilight Rivers passed anywhere close, and the closest settlement was over ten thousand kilometers away. With its awful communications, it took hours even for Hegemons to reach this spot.

There were no resources worth mentioning growing in this five-hundred-kilometer stretch of peaks and forested ravines. There were a few D-grade Beast Kings, all of unimpressive heritage, their ancestors thrown here to form a proper ecosystem. There was a grand harvest every thousand years or so to pluck the wild herbs this area was designed for, and the next harvest was over five centuries away.

The occasional E-grade cultivator would find themselves here to temper themselves and test their luck in case some unprotected treasure had appeared. Still, the place was pretty much deserted with the Twilight Ascent going on. The mountain range felt like a desolate patch of wilderness, like those you could find across most real worlds.

Yet beneath the seemingly calm surface lay a shocking secret.

“What do we care?” Paro snorted. “We have toiled for forty thousand years for the clan, and what is our reward? The best resources are kept for the main branch, with only scraps

being left for external elders. Didn't we decide back then? We'd earnestly work for the clan after joining, and whether we fulfill our hidden mission would depend on the reception."

"You're right." Alvaries sighed, her two tails dancing restlessly, each wave causing the air to crackle.

"Things have already reached this point," Paro added, noticing the hesitation in his wife's demeanor. "Even if we don't fulfill our tasks, there are no doubt others who will. When the dust settles, we won't be able to stay here, no matter which side is successful. We might as well go with the side that has already promised us the resources to take the next step. We... are running out of time."

Alvaries nodded and waved her hand, moving the spatial bubble they hid inside toward the closest ravine. They kept flying, following the markers on the intricate compass Paro continuously tinkered with. They eventually reached a secluded cave that looked no different than a thousand others just like it.

There was a tribe of bugbears inside, their matriarch just at the Peak E-grade. Alvaries and Paro flew right above their heads without causing a single wave, and reached an unmarked wall. Alvaries couldn't help her curiosity, and scanned the whole mountain along with thousands of meters of bedrock below.

There was just rock to her senses. A few Spiritual Metals were strewn about in the depths, but they weren't worth the effort of excavating. There really was nothing worth mentioning in the whole mountain, at least according to her **[Ripple Feedback]**. The wall was supposedly just a piece of F-grade stone, the same as the rest of the mountain range.

"Nothing?" Paro asked, and Alvaries nodded in confirmation. "Marvelous."

Paro took out a series of seemingly normal Low-grade Cosmic Crystals and placed them in a particular pattern on the wall. Nothing happened for a few seconds, causing the two to frown in consternation. Was the compass wrong? However,

their fears were alleviated as minute patterns slowly appeared in the depths of the crystals, forming an array on the stone.

They couldn't even sense a hint of energy fluctuations, and soon a door emerged. Even now, Alvaries was completely unable to sense anything amiss. Her scouting skill was still telling her it was sheer rock, and that they were walking through solid bedrock as they descended a set of stairs.

Each step took them hundreds of meters forward, yet it still took them five minutes before they reached the end of the tunnel. A large cave covered in extremely esoteric engravings. The cave itself was rough and uneven at first glance, but everything echoed with the Dao. Every stalactite, every outcropping—they all had a purpose in this plan.

It was a nigh-perfect fusion of array and natural formation, and Alvaries felt like she stood inside a Supreme array disk. Or almost inside it. The true core had to be the mysterious pond in the middle—rather, the three-meter-tall crystal hovering above it.

“I wonder which master set this up,” Paro said as he looked around with amazement. “I never heard anything about the lord being an Inscriptionist, especially not to this degree. Is someone from the outside helping him with all this?”

“Perhaps. I think his network is a lot larger than he lets on.” Alvaries nodded. “Are you confident in completing the task?”

“Don't worry,” Paro said with a smile to his wife. “I might not be able to completely understand this thing, but completing the objective is child's play.”

They walked over to the core crystal and Paro took out a two-meter-long spike, the array flag they'd been provided with so long ago. Sometimes he dipped it in the water, sometimes he used it to draw runes in the air. With each motion, the mysterious pond rippled a bit, and the energies got more and more condensed as the runes covering the ceiling and walls slowly came alive.

But the pattern was wrong. It followed the schematics Paro had worked on by himself in secret.

A wave of desolation gripped Alvaries' heart as she saw Paro slowly stab the flag into the water a few more times. She stepped closer as though she wanted to observe, but her right tail shot forward with impossible speed. On its tip was a perfectly black orb, a true miniature black hole that contained endless potential for destruction.

It slammed into the back of her husband before he had a chance to react, and his whole midsection was instantly turned to nothingness as pathways and Cultivation Core were disintegrated. There wasn't even an explosion as Paro's life foundation was extinguished, the rampant forces sent to the Void, never to be seen again.

"You knew?" Paro said with a weak voice after looking down at the massive hole where his core should have been.

"I knew," Alvaries sighed as she grabbed the grand flag with her second tail before it dropped into the pond.

Paro was the Array Master and the one who was supposed to finish this part of the task. Alvaries was supposed to scout for warriors sent to impede their task and protect her husband. However, forty thousand years was a long time. Long enough for her to learn the ins and outs of the array that now surrounded them. Perhaps almost as much as her husband.

Her tail elongated and turned into a blur as she lightly stabbed the array flag with expert precision across a series of spots on the pond, causing a dozen ripples to appear. Paro's meddling was erased as the small waves intersected, forming esoteric fractals, which submerged into the depths and superimposed on the hidden, prearranged pattern below.

The two sets formed a perfect whole, and the pond turned completely tranquil.

"Well, it was fun while it lasted." Paro coughed as he slumped to the ground.

"It really was," Alvaries said with red-rimmed eyes, looking upon the paramour with whom she'd shared her life

for eons.

The time had already come, and they'd both made their decisions and preparations. It was true what Paro said. They were running out of time, and it looked like they'd come to the same conclusion. Even if things went their way, there weren't enough resources for both to take the next step.

"Revive me if you reach the peak, will you?" Paro smiled as the life left his eyes.

"Of course." Alvaries nodded.

Far away, the trajectory of a Twilight River started to slightly adjust, its transformation so minute, it would be mistaken as a natural fluctuation. But in two years, it would become one of the spears launched at the Heavens themselves.

"Persistent bastards," Abonzo spat as he ate a healing pill before turning toward the leader of their group. "What now?"

Trivorad looked down at the twenty corpses, natives from both living and undead factions, and then at the vast patch of destruction that stretched almost as far as the eyes could see. The battle destroyed a fifth of Cork Island, leaving tens of thousands of scorched trees strewn about.

The group of seven sensed a few auras in the distance, but it was obvious those cultivators clearly displayed them to show they weren't an enemy.

"We're done here," Trivorad said. "The Deacon told us to destroy the source node on this island and install the rerouter, but we still have three other spots to cover. These natives were most likely here to stabilize the hidden weakness. There are also indications they are just one of many factions with similar tasks."

"Should we split up?" Vinka ventured.

"No," Trivorad said with a shake of his head. "The Havarok Dynasty sent over a hundred Peak Hegemons into

this place according to our intelligence. The Deacon wasn't certain whether their purpose is aligned with our own. The stars were obfuscated, but the patterns leaned toward them working against us. If we split up and encounter their parties, most of us will fall. We were sent here to lend assistance, not to sacrifice ourselves."

"Incoming!" Vinka suddenly shouted, and the group rapidly prepared themselves as a storm of Miasma roiled forward with tremendous speed.

A huge section of the island was suddenly shrouded in darkness as a thousand-meter skull peeked out through the thunderstorm.

"Looks like the Radiant Temple has a hand in this game after all," a jarring voice that sounded like a thousand wails emerged from the skull. "You've caused quite the scene."

"Killing a few miscreants is nothing much," Abonzo snorted, the air twisting around him.

A thousand-meter-tall temple surrounded by a radiant parhelion appeared above their heads. Ethereal chimes echoed from its halls, and the roiling storm of Miasma was somewhat pushed back by glistening starlight.

"Indeed, it's not. So why don't you enter our little cloud? I'll properly wake you up and give a miscreant like you a sense of purpose." Another voice laughed from within the storm.

"Enough," Trivorad said. "You should be a member of Hive Ouro. What is the opinion of the Eidolon on this situation?"

The huge skull was silent for a few seconds, and the group tensed themselves in case of another battle. Even Trivorad was a bit worried after sensing the sinister energies swirling inside the giant head. Hive Ouro alone was not a threat to the Radiant Temple, but the Eidolon was a lot more cohesive than the Draugr or the Reavers.

If one Hivemind had vested interests in Twilight Harbor, then it was very possible one of the four grand hives lent some

strength to back them up at a crucial time like this. His soul had been tempered by the Radiant Chapter for thirty thousand years, yet even he didn't feel confident against an enemy like this.

"The benefits of an ascension supersede the value of Twilight Harbor," the voice eventually said. "We can always set up new outposts in the area."

"So we're in agreement," Trivorad said, and the group relaxed. "Then we'll take our leave."

"Having a similar objective does not mean we belong to the same side," another voice cackled as two purple suns ignited inside the skull's eyes. "Your involvement is just an unnecessary complication. The Hive will suffice."

"War phalanx," Trivorad growled as the group all took out a red canister. "It's either us or them."

Even if Zac wanted to destroy the towering tree in the distance, was it even possible? Its diameter had to be at least five hundred meters, and a spiritual tree like this was no doubt extremely sturdy.

"Some factions might take offense to our task, but the mothertree has been destroyed a few times before." Catheya shrugged. "It will be back within twenty openings or so."

"In twenty thousand years, then?" Zac asked, really feeling the weight of their actions.

This was completely backward, but it somehow felt worse becoming an ecoterrorist and destroying an ancient tree compared to taking out hostile cultivators.

"Wait, it's not a sapient tree, right?" Zac asked.

"Not quite?" Catheya said after a much-too-long pause.

"Great," Zac muttered. He was about to continue complaining, but stopped when he saw an enormous fireball

slam into a small section of the tree trunk. “Others are attacking it!”

It was a squad of four people, who all unleashed one powerful attack after another at the mothertree. Zac spotted more squads just like them. Unfortunately for the four closest cultivators, their efforts didn’t seem very effective. The thick bark was like impervious armor, and only some small wood chippings fell from the attacks. It would take a lot of work to take down this oversized bastard.

“Looks that way,” Catheya said.

“Do we really need to get involved? Why not let others topple that thing for us?” Zac asked. “Mission complete in either case, right?”

“Well, first of all, I don’t know that. I have a specific array I was told to use. Secondly, why give this opportunity to others?” Catheya snorted as she turned toward the world tree.

Zac didn’t understand what she was talking about at first. Then his eyes widened when he spotted it: a massive **50,000** hovering above the tree. It should by all rights be covered by the skyscraper-sized leaves, but it looked like these kinds of things couldn’t be blocked.

Fifty thousand contribution points was even more than what you’d get from forming a Peak Dao Fragment, and more than enough for Zac to lose any moral hang-ups about forest preservation. Even if split between three, it was a massive boon. It would take dozens of life-and-death battles to get the equivalent number of points.

“Do you think there are more places like this in the Twilight Ocean?” Zac slowly asked.

“This tree should be one of the top three in the early stretches of the ocean, but there are definitely more of them along the way,” Catheya said with a teasing smile. “Not feeling so glum about our mission any longer? Our path will take us to multiple places like this.”

“Well, I’m just happy to help.” Zac nodded.

“A real gentleman.” Catheya laughed. “Come on, let’s go before someone steals our points.”

There might be a small risk of that happening, but Zac wasn’t so sure whether the mothertree was the prey or the predator as they moved closer. Over a hundred roots sprang up behind the group of cultivators who launched the fireball earlier. Two were turned into paste, while another was grievously wounded as she was slammed into the trunk by a lash.

The final member managed to avoid the ambush through an instantaneous movement skill or escape talisman. Seeing his party getting annihilated before they even managed to break through the bark was clearly more than he’d signed up for. He disappeared into the forest, running for his life.

Still, Zac wasn’t overly worried by the tree itself. He was currently in his Draugr form, but he was a Hatchetman at heart. Cutting down some branches and roots was something he excelled at. Besides, the putrefying mists from his various skills worked far better on organic things compared to weapons or stone, considering his Dao Fragment was based on the Seed of Rot.

As for cutting down the tree itself, it was impossible that Catheya didn’t have some plan for it.

They made their way toward the world tree, hiding as best they could, and Zac spotted a total of seven squads approaching. For now, no party seemed interested in fighting with each other. They were all trying different ways to fell the tree and reap the rewards. Of course, if it looked like one party had found a way to cut it down, then things would probably take a drastic turn.

Once they reached the trunk, Catheya blanched, as the area was suffused in life-attuned energies in addition to the Twilight Energy. The tree almost felt like a Nexus Vein. Its energy might not be very profound, but it was seemingly endless. Zac guessed Catheya’s task was to taint this massive reservoir, and his guess was quickly confirmed as she took out a two-meter spike covered in dense fractals.

It reminded Zac of how he'd heard that you could kill a tree simply by driving a copper nail into its trunk, poisoning it from within. Was this something in the same vein? It looked like it, though Catheya clearly wasn't able to simply push it through the thick bark. She erected a circular array around the spike, and it was entering the wood as though it were fusing with it.

The process was slow, and it clearly didn't go unnoticed as a shudder went through the area. The next moment, Zac heard a deep hum, and this time it was he who blanched after looking up at the distant tree crown.

“Wasps.”

MOTHER TREE

“How much more?” Zac growled as he was launched into the air by two chains. His axe was empowered by a massive jagged edge, cutting apart yet another two-meter wasp before destroying a large root that aimed for Catheya. “We’ll be overrun sooner or later.”

He wasn’t joking. The only reason there wasn’t a mountain of wasp corpses and destroyed roots around him was due to the corrosive effect of his domain turning everything to mush. Unfortunately, that meant he was walking around in ankle-deep sludge, which was pretty disgusting.

Another wasp was impaled by one of his chains, the corrosive liquid effortlessly digging through its armor plating. There were already five wasps hanging on the chain, forming a grisly warning to the other insects that hovered over their heads. And it actually worked. The domain of **[Deathmark]** almost doubled like insect repellent, and together with his warning, most of the wasps targeted the other groups.

Only three groups remained. The others had been scared away or eradicated by the residents of the tree along with the tree itself. The situation was somewhat stable, but the roots were never-ending. He’d just cut one apart and was forced to dodge a swift swipe the next moment as a five-meter-thick root ripped through the air.

He’d tried cutting one like it apart just a minute ago, only to find his edge incapable of cutting more than halfway. The slam had been enough to launch him fifty meters into the air and forced him to expend one of his three Healing Brands.

Varo did what he could to help, but he wasn't as useful in a protracted siege like this compared to ambushes. He ultimately took a defensive position behind Zac, cutting apart anything that snuck past his rampaging swings.

"Just a few more minutes," Catheya said as she threw a wink in his direction. "Keep it up, you're doing great. Very powerful."

Zac snorted in annoyance, but he knew she wasn't just messing around. Her arms were a constant blur as she formed various sigils that helped push the spike farther into the tree. Zac sensed she might actually be spending more Miasma than he was. And all this was while taking out an impressive number of wasps with the help of her icicles.

Varo occasionally crushed a Miasma Crystal next to her to alleviate the situation, and Zac eventually made a decision. A vast aura field of death spread out with Zac as the core, swallowing all the corpses and Catheya alike. The atmosphere took a drastic turn, and even the pervasive Twilight Energy was pushed away a bit. Obviously, it was the Peak-mastery **[Field of Despair]**.

Each upgrade increased the area it could cover, though Zac only used it for the immediate vicinity. Reaching Late-mastery in the skill allowed him to gain a better sense of everyone within the mists, and this sense was even further improved by reaching Peak mastery. The skill now expanded his observation abilities to the point they almost rivaled the omniscience he gained from **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**.

The weakening effect was strengthened further as well, now being able to fully remove up to 10% of the attributes up to the limits of E-grade Race, 2,500 attribute points. Even Zac would be noticeably impacted by such a loss.

The real reason for bringing out **[Fields of Despair]** was the improved conversion ratio, where each kill resulted in almost double the refund when corpses were drained. Zac felt a surge of Miasma entering his body, and both Catheya and Varo got to enjoy a weakened version of the boost.

“You know [**Fields of Despair**]? You actually managed to get an Epic F-grade class?” Catheya exclaimed. “I knew my instincts were right when hiring you. [**Fields of Despair**] is a very sought-after skill among the crusaders, but few can gain it. Any interest in selling it?”

Zac inwardly sighed at Catheya’s analysis. This was why he didn’t want to show too many of his skills unless necessary. Anytime he exposed something, there was a real risk of divulging even more than he planned.

“And cripple myself for some money?” Zac snorted as he cut off another root before it could slam into the defensive barrier Varo had erected. “No thank you.”

“Well, if you change your mind, the Eldritch Archivals are always looking for new Inheritance Crystals.” Catheya smiled. “Still, it’s pretty odd. That skill is given to commander-archetype classes, from what I’ve heard, a skill to bolster armies. Yet you don’t seem to follow that path at all. You give me the feeling of a surly lone wolf.”

“If you have the energy to chat, why not focus on speeding up that thing?” Zac sighed as he saw another of his spectral henchmen getting ripped apart after destroying a patch of roots. They kept popping up to deal with the wasps, but it was like the mothertree hated them with vigor. It targeted them within seconds of appearing, preventing him from building up a proper army.

“Don’t tell me you had a change of heart?” Catheya laughed, ignoring Zac’s comment. “No wonder you said you had no ambition to raise an army. Was the burden of command too heavy? Well, being a commander requires you to have faith in the strength of your followers. I think it was the right choice for you. You’re the ‘I’ll do it myself’ kind of guy. That’s not bad, mind you. A useless person can’t have that mindset and survive.”

“For the love of God,” Zac muttered, unleashing his annoyance on the wildlife.

He ignored Catheya’s teasing, knowing it was just her latest attempt at trying to extract more information from him.

Unfortunately for her, Zac had lived with a far wiler demon for over a year, and he was mostly immune to those kinds of attempts.

Instead, he focused on his form. The tree wasn't really sapient, and it was clearly just lashing out at random in their direction, like someone absentmindedly trying to wave away annoying flies. It gave him enough leeway to try some things out.

Zac pictured himself as a harried army defending an outpost, attacked from every direction by ferocious warriors. The attacks were like waves, and the pressure points kept changing. Like the army was trying to create a weakness in his defensive line. Zac lashed out in retaliatory force, sometimes defending, sometimes setting out in a raid to clean up problems before they arrived.

He even used his chains to create putrefying traps to stall the enemy lines. He was quickly integrating the various components of his undying tool kit into his path, but he still couldn't find the answer to his envisioned fusion. For now, he could only progress and hope he'd figure something out sooner or later.

The minutes passed, and Zac found a rhythm that significantly lessened his strain. The mothertree was a bit like the golem he'd fought to open the Dao Repository. It might contain boundless energy, but it didn't use it efficiently. It had a set of cycled actions, and Zac only needed to anticipate which it was. As for the wasps, unless a queen made its appearance, they wouldn't be able to change the situation.

A large circular pattern had almost completely formed around the spike, which was over three-quarters inserted into the tree. Zac estimated it would only take a minute or two before it was completely embedded.

"Stop right now!" a sudden roar echoed out as a large shape appeared among the Cork Trees in the distance.

Zac glanced in that direction, thinking it was some fool overestimating his own abilities. Their group was the smallest, but there were over twenty cultivators hacking away at the

tree. What would this lone warrior do about it? However, when Zac spotted the source, he froze for an instant, almost getting himself gored by a root.

It was a treeman emitting an almost blinding aura. He looked like a king walking among his subjects, the trees actually bowing slightly in deference where he passed. And it was no wonder. He was definitely cultivating some Dao of Nature, and his accomplishments decidedly eclipsed Zac's Fragment of the Bodhi.

He was roughly three meters tall, and his crown was made up of small green leaves with golden edges. A wheel of living wood hovered behind him, and Zac felt immense spiritual fluctuations from it. He guessed it was some sort of Natural Spirit Tool that had an awakened spirit just like **[Verun's Bite]**.

Together with his extremely condensed aura and Dao emissions, it became clear—this was absolutely not some random crab soldier, but a true elite. His estimation was proven right a moment later as a value appeared above his head: **2,500–5,000**.

There was no doubt about it, this guy had two Peak Fragments at the least, possibly even a Dao Branch. Together with his condensed aura, Zac wasn't entirely confident about their prospects.

"There's trouble," Zac said as the man closed in on them with fury written all over his face. "This guy's the real deal."

The other groups had come to the same decision, and one party after another disengaged and fled toward the forest. No one was making any real headway, apart from one group who managed to cut off roughly fifty meters of wood by unleashing thousands of cuts. Why keep risking their lives now that a Heaven's Chosen entered the picture?

Catheya frowned as she looked over, coming to a different decision than the other parties. A storm of Miasma gathered around her as a large fortress of pure ice sprang up out of nowhere. It fused with the tree itself to create an impervious barrier radiating a glacial intractability. Four glistening

crystals appeared above the ramparts, and Zac was almost blinded by [**Cosmic Gaze**] after seeing how much energy they contained.

Catheya must have sunk half her Miasma into this defensive layer.

“This defense will crumble when the four crystals are extinguished. Help lessen the burden,” she said with an uncharacteristically serious expression. “We don’t need to defeat him. We only need to delay him.”

Zac nodded and two chains pushed him up to the rampart. The treant quickly grew in size. He stood over ten meters tall, and the wheel grew to match his size. He gave Zac no further time to prepare as he grabbed the wheel and threw it at the wall with shocking force.

The three pygmies of [**Profane Exponents**] had already appeared behind him, and Zac infused the casket-bearing pygmy with massive amounts of Miasma, along with the Fragment of the Coffin, and a thick shield appeared in front of the wheel. However, there was trouble the moment the wheel clashed with the barrier.

The Miasma comprising the shield eroded and crumbled as a shocking verdure spread through his skill like a stream of lava cutting through a block of ice. He tried to infuse the barrier with more of his Dao, but the inevitable was barely delayed. The wheel soon shattered the coffin and continued its flight toward the ice wall.

No doubt about it; this was the power of a Dao Branch. There was no way a Peak Fragment held this kind of overbearing presence.

A growl escaped Zac’s lips as he jumped out to meet the attack himself. He refused to be overpowered by a simple throw, even if it was empowered by a Dao Branch. He shot forward from the rampart as two of his chains lodged themselves in the ground to stabilize his trajectory. A sinister jagged arc appeared in front of his edge as he swung at the wheel with everything he had.

Axe and wheel collided, and Zac felt as though he were submerged in an endless river of leaves. Each of those leaves contained a terrifying amount of life force, steadily purifying their surroundings. Or destroying, if you looked at it from the perspective of an undead. Thankfully, a good chunk of the momentum in the throw had already been expended, and Zac managed to push back the force as he landed outside the rampart.

His own form grew to five meters as the pitch-black armor of **[Vanguard of Undeath]** enclosed him, and a surge of power rushed throughout his body as his attributes were boosted by almost 10%. Apart from the improvement to his taunting ability, reaching Peak mastery had boosted the inherent buff, pushing it from 10% to 15% to his Base Attributes.

The boost was limited by the skill's grade though, and it couldn't keep up with Zac's exponential attribute growth in the E-grade. Just like Emily's elemental axes, Zac's constitution had already passed the limit of what the skill could boost. Hopefully, it would be enough to help slow down this mammoth.

The raging cultivator looked slow and clumsy in his colossal treelike form, but his actual speed indicated a Dexterity on par with Zac's own. He covered the distance in just a few seconds, and the wheel flew back into his hands just as he entered the domains of **[Fields of Despair]** and **[Deathmark]**.

The skills did what they were supposed to do. Except it only served to enrage the titanic avatar rather than harm him. He could clearly sense his surroundings just fine even when having his vision limited by **[Deathmark]**, and he looked absolutely infuriated as roots and wasps withered away with rot as an effect of the corrosive atmosphere.

As for the treeman himself, he was covered in a glowing sheen that rebuffed the corrosive domain from actually touching his body.

“You scoundrels! Do you know what you are doing?” the treant roared. “This mothertree is the lifeblood of the forest! Murder it and you will harm the whole population!”

The next moment, the deathly grip on the surrounding area was instantly ripped apart as a fantastical forest sprang up around him. The scene reminded Zac of his own **[Hatchetman’s Spirit]**, but its power was far beyond his own skill. The trees were like unholy beacons, except they radiated the warmth of life.

There were also thousands of small, dancing flower creatures, each of them emitting a strong sense of life. The corrosive mists of **[Deathmark]** killed them by the dozens every second, but new ones kept sprouting up from the ground to replace those that fell.

Zac’s **[Fields of Despair]** deactivated in just a second, unable to withstand the purifying effect of the treeman’s domain. His other skill was thankfully not that easy to get rid of, as it continuously emitted from his body, and the first axe wraith silently appeared behind the attacker.

The leaves and corrosive mists swirled as its axe ripped through the air, cutting straight at one of the giant’s legs. Zac sensed life-attuned energy entering the leg just before the collision, and he wasn’t surprised to see the thick bark nullifying the attack. He still wasn’t disappointed, as a section of sinister green runes appeared on the treeman.

Zac’s elation was quickly doused as a root shot out of the man’s leg, destroying the wraith by flooding it with Dao. The wood on its leg started to rot with speed visible to the naked eye, except the process was too quick. He hadn’t used **[Deathmark]** too many times and the skill wasn’t this powerful.

As expected, the section of the leg that was marked by the green runes separated from the treeman and was replaced by new roots and bark in a mere second. Meanwhile, Zac was assailed by the exuberant domain. He felt some of his buff from **[Vanguard of Undeath]** being nullified by a sense of weakness.

Thankfully the feeling wasn't too strong, since Zac was more resilient to life than normal undead. So what if some life-attuned energy seeped into his body? **[Purity of the Void]** was already fast at work expelling it, since it was considered a toxin in his current form.

Unfortunately, Zac wasn't the only one put under pressure by the fantastical domain, as roots started climbing up the icy ramparts, and one of the hovering crystals shrank with visible speed.

Even if Zac wasn't operating under the oppression of the treeman's domain, he still wasn't really a match for the cultivator. The treeman was clearly of the same opinion, as he ignored Zac and flashed toward the ice wall. A huge shockwave spread out as he straight up used himself as a battering ram, and two of the ice crystals shattered in response.

An enormous root from the mothertree itself emerged from the ground, and it actually looked like the treeman was able to communicate with it. He ordered it to slam into the wall, destroying yet another icy crystal before Zac even had a chance to react. Less than a fraction of a second had passed and three-quarters of Catheya's defenses were already exhausted.

"Keep him away!" a frantic shout came from inside as a glacial tide shot out toward the treant.

Zac gritted his teeth as the four chains of **[Love's Bond]** shot forward and latched around the giant's arms and torso. He grabbed the four chains and pulled with all the force he could muster. The treant was definitely a Heaven's Chosen with an attribute pool and Dao above Zac's own, but the power contained in Zac's pull couldn't be ignored.

The treeman was lifted off his feet and thrown back a few meters, causing him to look over at Zac with shock.

"You'll have to go through me first, buddy," Zac said, cracking his neck.

He wasn't as confident as he let on, but Zac was still slowly being filled with expectation as he took in the hulking

powerhouse. He'd discovered his Evolutionary Stance in a pitched battle against the Twinruin Bloodstalker a few months ago.

Wasn't this big guy the perfect target to take the same step in his current form?

TURN OF THE SEASONS

“Why do you insist on profaning nature like this?” the treant asked as he destroyed an axe wraith with a wave, his irate voice crackling like thunder. “Those points will not be enough to change anything.”

“Well, you never know,” Zac said as he stomped down on the ground, causing the familiar cage of **[Profane Seal]** to spring up and trap them both inside.

“I’ll teach you Draugr to respect nature. She’s your mother as well!” the treant shouted before he raised his arms. “Solstice!”

The enormous wheel rose behind the treant’s back, causing a shudder as it turned ninety degrees. The feeling of exuberant verdure was instantly exchanged for sweltering heat, where he was constantly blasted by an angry sun. The trees in the fantastical forest changed, starting to bear fruits that all turned into two-meter warriors that radiated the might of strong Middle E-grade fighters.

His sealing fortress had practically turned into a greenhouse, but the important thing was that it had sealed off the glacial fortifications behind him. Zac noticed an ice crystal was already re-forming, though its speed was fairly slow. With how much pure force the treant could exert, Zac’s F-grade trap wouldn’t last more than a hit or two.

Zac shot toward the treant before he had the chance to unleash any more skills. He needed to turn this into a dogfight and prevent the activation of any finishers. If this guy had

some skill like **[Arcadia's Judgment]**, he'd be able to take out both him and Catheya simultaneously. Twenty thick chains shot toward the treeman as well, desperately trying to bind him in place.

Unfortunately, even the strengthened chains the Peak-mastery of **[Profane Seal]** provided weren't enough to withstand the aura blasting out from the enemy. They were covered in a green moss that made them lose their structural integrity, forcing Zac to spend Miasma to form new ones. Zac changed his command to send most of the chains toward the wood puppets, while only using a few to harass the main target.

A furious war had already erupted inside the cage, with new wraiths and wood puppets appearing every second. **[Deathmark]** was burning a large amount of energy, though the same had to be true for the treeman's skill. Zac was happy to keep wasting energy, and he let the skill run.

A herculean jump put Zac in front of the even larger treant, and his bardiche clove through the air with furious momentum as the chains of **[Love's Bond]** shot toward the treant's hand grabbing for the Spirit Tool wheel. The titanic treeman was not so easily suppressed, and he formed a thick layer of bark on his forearm like a protective bracer to block Zac's swing.

Simultaneously, he snatched the chains of **[Love's Bond]** with a lightning-quick motion and hurled Zac away like a piece of garbage. Just before hitting the cage wall, Zac turned into a puff of smoke. It was **[Abyssal Phase]** activating in the nick of time, though Zac had shortened the cast time by 20% by infusing the final part with **[Force of the Void]**.

He shot back through the arena, ignoring the blistering heat that was even more palpable in his intangible form. Zac was once more in front of the living tree before he even had the chance to take two steps toward Catheya. Four chains shot at the treant's eyes as blue fire spread across his left leg.

Both Zac and a recently spawned wraith targeted the burning section, and huge chunks of wood were cut loose as the treant hurriedly avoided the chains threatening to blind

him. Zac wanted to follow up with another strike, but dozens of spear-like trees sprang up where he stood, forcing him to scramble out of the way.

It was a few of those weird pixies that had burrowed into the ground and transformed into weaponized trees. He'd ignored those things until now, but it looked like they were yet another threat. Zac swung his axe back and forth in wide arcs to cut the roots apart. They were far harder compared to the much larger roots of the mothertree.

Soon enough, Zac found himself bloodied and pushed back over fifty meters by an ever-expanding forest, and the treant was already lumbering toward the edge of the cage. The wound on the treeman's leg was fast recovering, and he grabbed the wheel, clearly intent on breaking apart the cage once and for all.

Zac rushed in to intercept, knowing he needed to change his tactics fast. His previous strikes had been meant to take him down in a similar fashion to how he'd taken down the blacksmith golem. Cripple limbs and then take him out. Unfortunately, this treeman was not only extremely powerful, but he also seemed to be a Vitality cultivator.

The good thing was that his attacks weren't overly powerful. The domain he released was sweltering but manageable. Though the wood puppets were powerful, they were restrained by **[Deathmark]** and **[Profane Seal]**. The wooden spikes, with a huge potential for large-scale destruction, wouldn't be able to take him out.

The biggest risk was the brute force in the treeman's swings along with his hidden cards. As long as he could restrain those, Zac would at least complete his job. He soon reached the giant, and instead of forcibly attacking with a huge swing, he dragged himself to the side with the help of **[Love's Bond]**, letting the other chains trail behind.

Suddenly, he was behind the treant, and three chains wound around one of the treeman's feet as Zac stomped down on the ground and pulled. The treeman grunted in annoyance, swinging the massive wheel in a wide arc to smash Zac. A

coffin-formed barrier appeared before the swing had even started, preventing the strike from generating any momentum.

The treeman managed to break through just a moment later, but Zac was already swinging his axe at the target's neck. A dozen terrifying branches, each one containing enough power to cause cracks in space, shot out of the treeman's crown to intercept. However, Zac's trajectory had already changed again thanks to his chains pulling him to safety.

Two chains of [**Profane Seal**] interlinked and formed a thick fetter as they slammed into one of the treeman's feet, causing him to stumble. Zac, along with his skills and chains, were everywhere, like a swarm of flies around a large predator. No strike was aimed to kill. Rather, they were aimed at ruining tempo and stealing momentum.

The treeman was becoming frustrated, and he forcibly swung the enormous wheel into the ground, causing a tremendous explosion that kicked up a storm inside the cage. Cracks spread across the walls and towers of [**Profane Seal**], where they slowly started to heal as there was no follow-up. Zac blocked out the shockwave by jumping into the air and shielding himself with [**Profane Exponents**], and was already back on the target before the treant finished his attack.

Zac could feel he was onto something, and his attacks started to gradually transform.

From the moment the first seeds of life appeared in the universe, they started their endless struggle against their surroundings: evolution. There was one more struggle that was born the very moment life was introduced to the cosmos: the struggle against death itself. Warriors risked their lives for the sake of power, wealth, and longevity.

However, even the supreme beings at the peak of the pyramid had one enemy they couldn't beat: the vicissitudes of time.

Aging and its inevitable withering were ever present and relentless, like a specter looming over the shoulder. No matter whether they fought or fled, it would be there, squeezing the last ember of resistance from their body. The rot would come

for even the greatest of emperors. Eventually, there was nothingness. Finality.

Zac looked to the towering treant as a representation of the living trying to delay the inevitable. The special Draugr sight he barely utilized until now was fast becoming the key that showed how life force constantly surged through the enemy's body. Combined with his **[Cosmic Gaze]**, he saw everything he needed to see to follow this new path.

Any time the giant tried to empower one of his skill runes, Zac was already there. An axe stabbed into his leg from behind and infused it with a corrosive rune. A chain shot toward a vulnerable spot to force a response. Zac himself unleashed a massive swing that even the treant would have to deal with.

Each little clash marked the enemy for death and closed another avenue of turning things around. This was not some sort of restriction of a skill, it was restriction through tempo. In fact, Zac's actions were gradually slowing down compared to the frantic pace he'd kept just a few seconds ago. Death never rushed, it was slow and methodical. Inescapable.

This was not the ruthless war of the jungle, but the endless war all beings fought against themselves. One represented change. The other stillness. There was no need to finish the war, as death had all the time in the world. He only needed to keep up the pressure, to douse any hope of resurgence. Zac felt as though he was becoming one with his path once more, but nothing lasted forever.

The treeman was ultimately just too powerful. Had this been a weaker target, they would have been locked and ground down until only a rotten pile remained. This was a Vitality-based cultivator with access to a Dao Branch. It was impossible for Zac to whittle him down. Just delaying him for a minute without using his Remnants was already a miracle.

And things were coming to an end. The giant was running out of patience, and Zac started to sense some burgeoning killing intent for the first time during the battle. This was something he realized from the start. This giant was actually

quite gentle. He hadn't really launched any true killing blows. At least not until now. The treeman was taking off the kiddie gloves.

Even worse, it looked like the companions of the treant were catching up. Zac could sense two strong beacons of life force rapidly closing in.

A green, fifty-meter-tall rune appeared in the air as the treeman roared with frustration, and Zac may as well have been hit by a train as he was flung away and slammed into the wall of **[Profane Seal]** on the other side of the cage. Cracks spread across the whole cage from the immense aura of the rune, and its intensity just kept growing.

Zac tried to rush back but was stopped by a sea of roots threatening to swallow him. It was like nature's rage had been unleashed, in an even more palpable way compared to his **[Nature's Punishment]**. Life was running amok, and Zac did all he could to delay the inevitable. His cage was like a water balloon filled with a small ocean. It simply couldn't contain this kind of an attack and broke apart.

"I can't hold him, and more are coming!" Zac roared.

The slithering roots looked like a sea of snakes with the treant in the middle. Zac was forced up on the icy ramparts for protection. A second crystal had regrown while Zac delayed, but it was already broken apart from the pressure. Zac was overcome by a pang of danger, and a burning orb shot toward the fortifications.

In its heart was the wooden wheel of the treant, practically turned into a sun as it blazed with terrifying heat. The treeman was cultivating some sort of class and Dao related to the four seasons, and he guessed each season had its own strength. Spring and summer were most likely the most efficient seasons against the undead, while the other two were related to death and decay, making them unsuitable to fight the unliving.

In either case, a raging inferno like the one coming their way was definitely enough to smash the fortifications in one go. One coffin barrier after another appeared to block the sun's approach, and were crushed one by one. This time it wasn't

just a simple Dao-empowered Spirit Tool. There was an E-grade skill empowering the attack.

Zac was out of options, and the black shroud of the third pygmy shot forward and enclosed the incoming attack. It was like trying to push a mountain with his bare hands. There was simply no way to transport it far away like he had during the last fight. He only managed to adjust the attack's angle, making the wheel slam into the ground just in front of the icy wall.

A veritable bomb had gone off, and both roots and wall were disintegrated. Zac was flung into the trunk of the mothertree, landing just a few meters away from Catheya and her array. The spike was nearly completely inserted, with less than a foot remaining.

“Seize the moment,” Catheya shouted. “Just one more attack and we’re done.”

She pointed her hand toward the treant, and a shocking burst of cold blasted out from a blue gem on her bracelet. The smoldering, spreading fire was quenched, and thousands of incoming roots were chilled and drastically slowed.

Darkness spread across thousands of meters in each direction as a tunnel of destruction shot straight for the treeman. It was Varo, who unleashed a stab that contained tremendous might. Like he'd pierced space itself for hundreds of meters, and innumerable roots were ripped apart in an instant.

Even the treant was afflicted with a deep scar as he stumbled backward.

Zac saw the opportunity and rushed forward with all the speed he could muster. Energy surged into his body as two thick streams of mental energy entwined before they moved to the huge jagged edge that was fast forming. Dao from the hanging coffin in his mind seeped into one of the spirit streams, and his Dao avatar representing his Fragment of the Axe infused the second.

The black jagged edge of [**Gorehew**] transformed a bit, with sharp barbs appearing across the jagged edge. It radiated a terrifying aura, a mix of destruction and desolation.

“Watch out!” a scream echoed out from the distance, but it was too late.

The treeman barely had time to tilt his body and erect a few layers of bark before the Dao-braided edge cut deep, leaving a terrifying wound behind. The scar ran for over two meters from his shoulders down to his midriff, and the wound already reeked of rot. The treant wailed and fell over. Zac barely had time to register the strike before he was forced away by a blood-colored root.

It was one of the two followers who’d almost caught up. She radiated a shocking killing intent that far eclipsed her companion’s and even Zac’s own. If the original treant was mildly upset about Zac and Catheya messing with the mothertree, then this new arrival was ready to enter a death match. Her whiplike root reeked of blood.

Zac barely managed to avoid the strike with the help of [**Love’s Bond**]. The treant had already reached her leader. Luckily for Zac, she seemed more occupied with treating the grisly wound of her companion than dealing with him, and he rushed for the mothertree. He had a pretty good understanding of the situation.

The powerful treant was probably a talented but sheltered scion, and the two followers were enforcers sent into the trial by his family to help him out. They were ready to kill from the get-go, and they’d definitely tasted blood before.

“Time to go,” Zac wheezed the moment he reached Catheya, who was still forming a series of seals with her hands.

“Not yet,” she said, trying to complete the process. “I just need—”

She didn’t get any further as a coffin-shaped shield slammed into the head of the spike with enough force to cause the whole mothertree to shudder. It was Zac, who’d turned

[Love's Bond] into its defensive form and decisively used it as a hammer to push the spike the rest of the way.

“There, done,” Zac grunted. “Time to go.”

AGENT OF CHAOS

Catheya blankly looked back and forth between Zac and the firmly embedded nail, which soon disappeared, clearly shocked at having her work being finished so crudely.

“You...!” Catheya stuttered, but quickly regained her bearings. “Fine, it should still work. What a brute, so impatient.”

She waved her hand and a blinding snowstorm spread out from their location. Varo followed up with his shroud of darkness. Catheya gripped both his and Varo’s hands, and Zac felt his surroundings lurch. The next moment they were thousands of meters away, hidden among the normal Cork Trees.

Catheya hurriedly took out an array disk from her Spatial Ring and it started to emit soothing ripples into the surroundings as they started running. Zac felt a slight pressure on his mind. Someone was scanning the area. Thankfully, the pressure soon moved, no doubt thanks to Catheya’s array.

“It passed us,” Catheya whispered, her mouth crooking upward as she looked at Zac. “You really got the job done. Though I might deduct some style points for being so crude with the array.”

“You can’t hold it against me. That guy was way too strong, and his helpers had arrived,” Zac muttered with some helplessness. “We only succeeded at all since he wasn’t willing to go all out at the start.”

“Don’t worry, you went above and beyond what could be expected.” Catheya laughed. “You were quite impressive. Your skill set is a bit disjointed, but you have clearly found a path of your own. I’m a bit jealous.”

Zac snorted, not forgetting to keep vigil of the surroundings as they escaped in the same direction they’d come from. All in all, he was pretty happy with the outcome as well. He didn’t manage to complete his combat style, but its framework was already formed. Zac thought it would take months. Fighting one powerhouse saved a lot of time.

Now he just needed to keep sharpening it against opponents. Hopefully ones not as unkillable, or as gentle, as the treeman.

The trio kept on for another hour, avoiding any cultivator groups thanks to Catheya’s uncanny senses. However, they stopped when they heard extremely loud thunder that reached all the way to their bones. The group looked to the sky. There was nothing except the occasional scattered cloud blocking an otherwise clear sky.

Catheya’s eyes lit up, turning toward where they’d fled. Zac followed suit just in time to see the whole mothertree topple over with a deafening crash. Thousands of trees were pushed to the ground from the shockwave, and a storm of life-attuned energies reached for the sky as Zac and the other two were thrown off their feet.

The scene was almost blinding to Zac with his abyssal eyes, reminding him of the incursion pillars. The pillar didn’t actually disappear, it kept spewing energy as though the tree had been a stopper to an underground geyser of pure life. It looked like the spike worked as intended, though it had taken some time for it to finish the job.

Zac opened his Ladder Screen a couple of times over the past hour, but he was a lot more hopeful this time around.

[Arcaz Black – Contribution: 39,746 Rank: 7,541. Value: 100–250.]

His contribution points made a tremendous leap, increasing by almost five times thanks to getting roughly half of the contribution for felling the tree. Zac didn't know how the System calculated contribution, but felt it was fair enough. He guessed Varo only got a few percent while Catheya took the rest. It was great news since it proved Zac didn't lose out even if he only acted as a meat shield.

The sudden boost pushed him all the way to the top ten thousand, which was a huge improvement from his steady drop to the three hundred thousandth spot as all the participants entered. It was impossible to make any exact assumptions with so many ways to gain contribution, but he guessed there were at least six thousand people who possessed a Life or Death Dao Branch in this trial.

The others ahead of him most likely had a combination of forming a Peak Dao Fragment along with points from slaughter and destruction.

“Isn't that something? I wasn't holding out much hope for the trial, but perhaps I'll be pleasantly surprised.” Catheya smiled before she turned away from the fallen tree.

Zac understood what she was talking about. He'd observed his employer over the past fights, and was starting to make deductions. She most likely had two Daos, with the main one being related to ice. She'd also used a death-attuned Dao a few times, mostly while tinkering with the corpses she collected during the trial.

He sensed that the terrifying ice flower she'd used to take out two ambushers had been imbued with a braid of the two, with ice being the leader.

Her current bounty was 100–250, and Zac estimated she was in the lower span of the range while he was in the upper. That didn't make her weak, but rather that her main focus wasn't valued by the Tapestry of Twilight. It was possible there were many other powerful warriors out there in a similar situation. Holding powerful Daos that weren't related to Life or Death.

“Any guesses why we did this? I mean, topple the tree specifically,” Zac asked. “Was it to release all that life energy?”

“I’m guessing it has something to do with the Living Pulse,” Catheya said after some thought. “The mothertree doesn’t seem to have much value. Its wood is pretty durable, but it’s not a treasure wood.”

“Then what?”

“If I had to guess, I’d venture the tree was a node in an enormous natural formation spanning either a part of the Twilight Ocean or even the whole thing. We’re either modifying or destroying that formation by hitting some of the nodes,” Catheya said. “And don’t ask me why. I have no idea.”

“Won’t that guy or someone else just fix it now that we’re gone?” Zac curiously asked.

“Perhaps, but does it really matter?” Catheya grinned. “We finished our job. If someone wants to undo the damage we caused, what do I care? Besides, that guy is powerful, but I don’t think he has the means to revert our actions. The tree falling most likely set off a chain reaction that’s hard to stem.”

“There’s quite some distance from the peak,” Zac muttered. “I couldn’t even hurt him, and we barely delayed him a minute.”

“Why are you complaining? You know who that was?” Catheya chortled. “It was Yanub Mettleleaf, one of the top E-grade warriors in the whole Twilight Harbor. We’re lucky it wasn’t some life-or-death battle, and rather that he was simply upset about us harming the mothertree. We’re also pretty lucky it was a young treant who arrived rather than a squad of killers. A lot of the treemen are pacifists and not that skilled in killing arts. Of course, that’s until you get them properly enraged.”

Zac wasn’t surprised to hear the treant was someone famous considering the power he’d unleashed by the end. And he actually recognized the name from the information missives he’d prepared. Yanub was ranked in the top thousand among

the hundreds of millions of E-grade warriors in Twilight Harbor. He was over three hundred years old, and the consensus was that he'd delayed his evolution almost a century to participate in this Twilight Ascent.

Such an action would rob most human cultivators of their momentum, but treemen could simply take root and go semi-comatose. They barely made any progress in cultivation that way, but their aging was drastically slowed as well. It was almost like entering a time-dilation zone that sped time up rather than slowed it down.

Besides, those listings weren't too accurate, as the exact strength of all those peak characters was unknown. Especially this close to a Twilight Ascent. Yanub might barely be in the top five thousand or he might be aiming for a top one hundred spot. It was hard to tell for Zac, who hadn't encountered too many elites at Peak E-grade.

"How would you rank someone like that in this trial?" Zac curiously asked.

"He wasn't some top character," Catheya slowly said. "He's a second-seed talent who's most likely exhausted his potential for the E-grade. In Twilight Harbor he might be considered a first seed due to having formed a Dao Branch, but I doubt it. His great power mostly comes from time rather than talent. I'd say he has a good shot at top one thousand, even five hundred if his experiences sharpen him a bit."

"Seeds?" Zac asked with confusion.

"Just a way to categorize potential. A second seed could be seen as one of the ten most talented cultivators of a generation in a faction. A first seed cultivator is someone who only appears once every few generations. Above that is the Heaven's Chosen, extreme talents who might only appear once every thousand generations in a clan," Catheya said. "These kinds of talents are often eligible for unique stipends and opportunities from the empires they belong to."

"Alright." Zac nodded, frowning when Catheya stared at him expectantly. "Thank you?"

“What, thank you!” Catheya spat with annoyance. “Aren’t you going to ask what seed I am!”

Zac looked at Catheya for a few seconds as they kept running. “Second seed, perhaps?”

“Well, whatever,” Catheya huffed, which caused Zac to smile a bit since he felt he’d hit the bull’s-eye. “We’re here.”

Zac looked around in confusion. It was the same river they’d run along for the past ten minutes. He glanced at Catheya quizzically, who shot him a grimace before jumping into the water. Varo was right on her heels, and Zac followed suit. Zac soon found Catheya swimming toward a dense patch of seaweed, and realized there was a hard-to-spot tunnel behind a boulder.

They swam inside, and the water was soon replaced by a dry underground cave. It just looked like a decent hideout, until Catheya took out another array disk and put it against the wall, causing another entrance to emerge.

“A secret shipyard. There are thousands spread throughout the island,” Catheya explained as they reached a large well-lit cave. “This one was created by an elder of the Eldritch Archivals a long time ago. The undead are always outnumbered in this place, and she figured she’d be safer when hiding beneath a life stream.”

In the middle, the huge tree trunk of the Cork Tree was placed on a few beams. Its crown was already cut off and thrown to the side, and there were three small mountains of wood chippings to indicate the hollowing-out was well underway.

Yod and Sharpo were out of sight, but judging from the sawdust being thrown out of a hatch in the trunk, he guessed they were fast at work hollowing the thing out. Qirai held a massive brush, coating the coarse bark in some unknown black tar that held a strong and refreshing aroma of death.

“Oh, mistress!” Qirai exclaimed when she saw the trio enter the shipyard, and two heads emerged from within the trunk. “Is it done? We felt an earthquake just before.”

“It’s done.” Catheya nodded. “How are things going here?”

“It’s not too bad. We just can’t exert too much force on the wood without risking forming hidden cracks,” Qirai said. “It’ll be another hour or two.”

“Good job,” Catheya said, imprinting some information into a crystal and turned to Zac. “These are the interior plans. Your sections are marked, and you can change them as you wish as long as you don’t weaken the structural integrity. Oh, and don’t use your putrefying abilities to dig, I don’t want our ship to turn into a rotten piece of scrap in two days.”

Zac snorted and jumped into the enormous trunk. He was pretty anxious to leave this place after the ruckus they’d caused. If he needed to become a carpenter to make that happen, then so be it. They’d made decent progress, but how could they compare to a Hatchetman? Zac’s arm turned into a blur as huge shavings were cut off around him.

The wood was pretty strong, but it was nothing to **[Rakan’s Roar]** when it was imbued with the Fragment of the Axe. One room after another was created with blazing speed, each one crafted with pinpoint precision. Zac might not be able to craft things with fractals, but it wasn’t difficult to cut things out following a map.

Qirai thought it would take up to two hours to finish the preparations inside, but through Zac’s effort, the interiors were done in less than thirty minutes. Sharpo and Yod had even decided to get out of his way and opted to help Qirai coat the hull. Soon enough it was all done, at which point Catheya produced a massive sheet of fabric.

It was covered in thousands and thousands of crystals and fractals. Zac looked on with interest as she spread it across the vessel. Qirai, Yod and Zac helped lift the whole tree, and Varo and Catheya finished the wrap to completely enclose the trunk. Catheya jumped inside the submersible a moment later, no doubt to install the inner components of the array.

The group waited for another twenty minutes, at which point they sensed the array come to life. The huge tarp

changed color to match the pitch-black coating before it melded with the wood itself. Left behind were inscribed patterns and embedded crystals on the bark.

The transformation wasn't done there. The vessel shrank to just a third of its original size, no doubt to make it more durable and harder to spot. He didn't know if there was a spatial array among the large number of fractals, but even if there were none, he knew the vessel wouldn't be cramped. He'd hollowed out most of the rooms, and knew thirty people would comfortably fit inside even after the ship shrank, let alone six.

"Impressive," Zac muttered.

"Our mistress has her means," Qirai proudly said. "Come, make yourself useful and help carry this thing to the dock."

The dock was a large pool at the back end of the cave, and they simply threw their new vessel into the water to make sure it wasn't leaking. Everything looked fine, and a minute later the whole group had boarded and the ship sailed at the bottom of the river, heading for the closest outlet into the Twilight Ocean.

The group, except Varo, who was off somewhere steering the submarine, sat in a meeting hall, looking a lot more comfortable compared to before. The coating alone helped keep out some of the life attunement, and the purity array was already up and running, with Qirai holding the black orb that was its core.

"There we go. Everything went according to plan." Catheya smiled.

"What's our next step?" Zac asked.

"There are three more places we need to visit on the way to the Life-Death Pearls. We'll make use of the Living Pulse for speed between these spots, after which we'll head for the location of the pearls," Catheya explained.

"What about all the treasures around us?" Sharpo asked.

"We're still in the outer parts of the Twilight Ocean. Treasures are sparse, and chances of finding something good

are pretty low. This vessel does have some scanning capabilities, and we'll stop if we spot something interesting. Otherwise, we'll proceed at full speed toward richer waters," Catheya said.

Sharpo appeared a bit disappointed, no doubt hoping to make use of the safety of the group to find more troves. Zac was more than fine with the current plan. If anything, he wanted to head toward the deeper waters as soon as possible. The quicker he could get his hands on the Life-Death Pearls, the quicker he could improve his Daos and move on toward his other goals.

In fact, he wanted to split off from the group sooner rather than later. Hanging around Catheya with her hidden goals was asking for trouble. This time it had worked out fine with the Mettleleaf guy, to the point Zac had even gained some insights. But who knew who'd crop up the next time?

Also, the "helpful" purification arrays she'd erected in this vessel actually did more harm than good for his cultivation.

The arrays were turning a part of the Twilight Energy into normal Miasma, which did nothing for him since he wasn't a cultivator. Twilight Energy had the odd ability to burrow into people whether they liked it or not, which was what allowed his soul and **[Void Heart]** to continuously absorb the energies.

The meeting went on for a few more minutes until Varo's voice echoed out through a speaker.

"We have left Cork Island."

"Alright," Catheya smiled. "Everyone is free for now. Remember the rolling schedule for the purification array. Each member's chambers have been equipped with a daughter node. Use that one to empower the array when it's your turn."

Finally, things had calmed down, and the fifty-meter-long tree trunk shot through the depths, its advance powered both by the arrays and the nearby stream cutting through the ocean. Two weeks passed without much happening until they closed in on a cave called the Divine Grotto.

It wasn't quite as impressive as it sounded. The cave was just a mine with a lot of life-attuned Spiritual Metals. No one in the party cared about those kinds of things even if there was a small chance of finding valuable metals in the depths of the tunnels. It wasn't that people didn't like money, but rather that the Divine Grotto would soon fill up with living cultivators looking for a relatively safe place to gather wealth.

The group still entered after stowing the submersible. Three hours later, they emerged, swimming for their lives. This time their assailants weren't Dreamers, but rather a few thousand crablike creatures that didn't take kindly to Catheya installing a weird gathering array that started drawing Miasma into the whole grotto.

There was even a massive Half-Step D-grade boss in the mix, which forced everyone to throw out a series of defensive barriers to block the exit long enough to summon the submersible and escape. Zac wasn't certain what would happen to the Divine Grotto after their sabotage, but he guessed the Divine Materials wouldn't be quite as divine after a year or two.

After that, it was on to the next one of Catheya's targets, and Zac felt he was fast becoming an agent of chaos.

DETOUR

The damage caused by their actions was not readily apparent. Zac believed things would eventually reach a tipping point. Perhaps the Living Pulse would be gone by the time they were done unless someone stopped them. Ultimately, Zac didn't care too much. Messing with the Divine Grotto had provided another eight thousand contribution points, so their actions were clearly sanctioned by the System.

Zac sat in his private compartment, currently busy powering the purification array. Running the array for hours on end wasn't terribly taxing, it was just boring. It was impossible to enter a meditative state when he constantly had to maintain the array, and there wasn't much else to do. He could only go over various missives on the Twilight Ocean to pass the time, and had read them cover to cover over a dozen times.

He'd pretty much memorized all the fixed locations, but more than half of the locations and dangers were new things the System added between generations, and this was especially true for the Twilight Chasm. Being completely prepared was a fool's hope.

Finally, his time was up, and he took his hand away from the array. Zac felt life-attuned energies spread through his chambers, and were soon pushed away as the air gained another Death-aspected Dao instead of his Fragment of the Coffin. It was Yod who started channeling the array, taking the next shift.

The purification couldn't keep all the life energies away in the ship, especially not this close to the Life Pulse, but it did lessen the strain the others felt. As for Zac, his mental ocean was far from saturated, and he'd be able to remain unaffected for a long time.

However, Zac noticed that the speed his **[Void Heart]** had to work increased by a noticeable margin, now beating once every five minutes compared to the once every ten back at the starting continent. That meant the energy density was roughly double now that they'd entered the middle reaches of the trial. He wasn't sure it would be able to deal with all the energy by the point they reached the inner parts of the ocean.

Zac took a deep breath. It was time. He'd spent the past two weeks going over the insights he'd gained during his battle with Yanub Mettleleaf, integrating his new stance with his insights into the Dao of the Axe.

He restored his mental energy with Soul Crystals for an hour before he took out two small boxes from his Spatial Ring, each containing a Dao Treasure. Zac stabilized his mind before he ate the first one. A surge of energy entered his body, and it circulated through his pathways before it shot toward his mind.

The hidden node **[Spiritual Void]** woke up and started absorbing the delectable energies, but Zac forcibly stilled it as he pushed the energies toward the avatar of himself. The avatar stood up on top of his Soul Core, and he started swinging his copy of **[Verun's Bite]** in a series of attacks.

Some of the swings were quick and unfathomable, whereas others were powerful and overbearing like a battalion of heavy cavalry descending upon an unsuspecting enemy. Some felt like they contained world-ending force while empty, whereas others appeared average but had the strength to slay powerful generals.

This was the insight Zac had started to work toward for some time. He was walking down the path of war, and war was ever changing. His axe needed to be the same, especially now that he was forming two very different combat stances.

Zac had found himself on the losing end against weaker enemies on multiple occasions, and it was usually because he used his weapon like a brute.

Certainly, the axe was ultimately not a weapon as versatile as the sword, but it didn't mean it was simple. As he'd started refining his paths, he realized there were endless variations and permutations to even a seemingly crude weapon as the axe. He wanted to shed his rigidity in favor of flexibility. To become as ever changing and unpredictable as the tides of war.

That didn't mean he was heading toward a Dexterity-based fighting style from Strength-based. One of the goals of a Strength-based warrior should always be to constantly refine themselves and figure out how to make their strikes land. How to catch the wily rangers, how to find the weakness in the guardian's armor, how to fell the undying ones in one fell blow.

Strength was the basis of victory and survival in his Evolutionary Stance, and without enough strength, his Inexorable Stance would be useless. Who would allow themselves to be restrained if they could simply power through and break his tempo like Yanub eventually had?

Scenes of his recent battles flashed by, and a path was slowly forming. However, Zac frowned when he sensed his inspiration turn hollow, like he was daydreaming rather than pondering his Dao. He ate the second fruit, and once more found himself immersed in the sensation of communicating with the Heavens.

Something blurred became focused, snapping into place. Zac opened his eyes, and a smile spread across his face as he opened his Dao Screen.

Fragment of the Axe (Peak): All attributes +40, Strength +1,110, Dexterity +700, Endurance +30, Wisdom +130. Effectiveness of Strength +20%.

Zac grinned at the result. It was a long time coming, but it didn't make it less satisfying. His boost from gaining eight levels back in Twilight Harbor had been substantial, but it ultimately couldn't compare to a Dao breakthrough at his

stage. A level provided roughly 350 attributes now that he was in the Middle E-grade, but a Dao evolution provided over 2,200 attribute points thanks to his massive multipliers.

It was also a welcome change to see the Fragment of the Axe add some extra Dexterity. He'd essentially been forced to continuously pour his free points into Dexterity to scale it with his other attributes. This would give him a breather to focus on either pushing his Strength to even greater heights or work on his survivability.

No one wanted to die, but Zac leaned toward putting points into Strength for a while. He still had two Dao Fragments waiting to be upgraded as soon as he got his hands on the Life-Death Pearls. Each would provide a big boost to his survivability, making it unnecessary to waste his free points there.

Zac opened his ladder, then sighed and closed the screen after seeing he hadn't gained any contribution points for evolving the Dao Fragment. It was expected, but he'd held out some hope to at least get a consolation prize.

He closed his eyes again and started observing his Dao avatar, but Zac only got a few minutes to get acquainted with the evolved Fragment before he heard a chime. He opened his eyes and shot a querying glance at the door leading to the communal area. Someone was standing outside. Zac got up with a grunt and crossed his living room.

It wasn't too big, just forty square meters, though it would be considered an extremely luxurious suite on any cruiser back on Earth. Catheya hadn't prepared any furniture, so Zac had simply thrown out some random things he had lying around, making the interior look a bit sparse and discordant.

Zac's favorite feature was a "window" that covered half his outer wall. It was actually an array that connected to the patterns outside, and gave Zac a grand view of the outside. Sometimes it was just hazy water. Other times there were beautiful corals or schools of fish flashing by. Right now, it was turned off, as Zac hadn't wanted to be disturbed during his breakthrough.

“It’s you,” Zac said to Catheya as he opened the outer door. “Come in.”

“Congratulations are in order.” She smiled as she sat down at the table and activated the window array.

“Were you spying on me?” Zac said with a slight frown as he sat opposite her.

“Hardly.” Catheya laughed and took out a decanter of wine and two glasses. “I could feel your breakthrough through the door. A weapon-based Fragment, no?”

“Axe.” Zac nodded, taking a swig of the wine. “What brings you here?”

“What a boorish fellow. A beautiful girl comes to your chambers and you scrunch up your brows like you’ve been asked to lend money to a stranger.” She sighed. “We have been in this place almost a month now, and I was bored. Besides, you have an air of loneliness around you. I figured you could use the company.”

“That’s just how cultivation is.” Zac shrugged as he looked outside. “What are your plans after we’ve messed up the trial ground and snatched those pearls?”

“We’ll see,” Catheya said. “Probably keep going a bit farther and look for inheritances or troves as we make our way toward neutral waters. Why, you want to travel with us?”

“Just making conversation,” Zac said, neither confirming nor denying. “How far are we from the next spot of our mission?”

“We’re pretty close. This one might take a few days though,” Catheya said. “It’s deep underground.”

Zac nodded noncommittally, and they sat in silence until Catheya changed the subject.

“Are you able to send a message to my ancestor?”

“If I could, what would you provide in return?” Zac retorted.

“How about an adorable wife?” Catheya said with a sweet smile.

Zac answered the proposition with a blank look saying all that needed to be said, causing Catheya to hump in annoyance.

“Whatever, who’d want such a boorish husband as yourself? I’d spend my days wilting away all alone while you were locked away in a cultivation cave,” she snorted before she downed her glass. “Well, let’s go. We need to recoat the vessel before setting off toward the next target. The energies are getting pretty powerful, and we can’t have the ship breaking apart in this area.”

She sashayed toward the door, and Zac found his eyes drifting toward her lithe waist and swaying hips illuminated by the ambient light of the Twilight Ocean. He froze when he found Catheya had stopped, looking at him with a victorious smile.

“Maybe you’re not a complete blockhead aft...” she said with a smug grin, but her voice drifted off, gaze going to the window with a confused frown. “What are they—”

Her eyes widened in alarm and she took out an array crystal and frantically infused it with energy. Zac immediately got a sinking feeling as he whipped out his axe. But he only had time to hear a horrified, “*NO!*” from Catheya before the wall to his chambers was ripped apart, and they both were dragged out by an unrelenting force.

The world turned into a confusing blur as Zac suddenly found himself plunged into the Twilight Ocean. It didn’t take long for him to figure out what was going on. It hadn’t been a powerful cultivator that attacked their vessel. It was destroyed by the Living Pulse itself, and Zac was completely caught by it.

He tried to swim out toward the calmer waters, but the force in the stream was too much for him. Zac was constantly dragged back and forth by the chaotic swirls, but he did spot a few scraps of their broken submarine around him.

What the hell happened? Why were they this close to the Living Pulse? They'd always kept a respectable distance, only taking advantage of the power of the stream without actually getting close. Had some piece of debris shot out of the Living Pulse and slammed into their ship with enough force to overpower the shields? Or did the steering arrays malfunction?

A huge piece of rock slammed into his back with enough force to make him see stars. It reminded him of the simple fact that this was no time to worry about the reason for the ship failing. Even worse, the hit along with the frantic current actually made him lose his grip on **[Rakan's Roar]**, and the Spirit Tool was swallowed by the stream.

Zac felt a pang of loss, but quickly regained his wits as he took out a random spare axe and a shield before activating **[Vanguard of Undeath]**. He hoped it would provide an additional layer of protection. At least before he was shocked to find his armor instantly ripped apart by the rampant energies inside the stream.

The same happened to the three poor pygmy skeletons when he tried conjuring them. They desperately held on for just a second before they couldn't take the torrential force and fell apart. Zac was left to defend with his body alone. He was already a bit delirious from the insane amounts of life-attuned energies.

Zac could only activate the defensive mode of his Tool Spirit, conjuring the shield for the first time in a while. The coffin lid was extremely sturdy, and the occasional beast carcass or piece of debris that shot toward him was diverted without too much effort. However, that didn't much help with his real predicament. He was getting poisoned to a degree that not even he could deal with.

He considered activating **[Abyssal Phase]** to move away, but gave up on the idea. The life-attuned energies were dense enough to almost blind him, and he had no idea what would happen if he turned himself into an intangible ghost. He might find himself ground to dust the moment he lost his physical form. He was better off in his current form, as his **[Void**

Heart] was furiously beating to convert the invasive life force into pure energy.

He also knew it was just a temporary relief. The hidden node could only convert so much, and he was being continuously drowned in it. Zac tried to activate an escape talisman sewn into his robes, but it fizzled out. He frantically looked for other means of escape, but his surroundings were suddenly replaced by darkness before he found a solution.

The Living Pulse had burrowed underground. This was his chance.

His eyes adjusted to the darkness as **[Love's Bond]** transformed to its offensive form. The stream continuously split as it pushed into dozens of different caves, and Zac lost any sense of direction. He kept trying to stop his frantic journey with the help of his chains, but even a split-up Living Pulse contained too much force.

Half an hour passed until the submerged tunnel around him expanded into a proper cave. Two chains shot forward and embedded themselves in the ceiling, and Zac desperately dragged himself out of the stream before he was pulled even farther.

Finally safe, if you could call it that.

There was a thin tunnel leading straight up where the water wasn't raging, and he only needed to follow the path for a few minutes before reaching a cave that was drained. He dragged himself up and activated an illusion array with shaky hands as he ate a healing pill. Even then, he fell unconscious a few seconds later.

Zac woke sore and nauseated. A quick scan proved there was nothing overly wrong with him. He'd slept for over ten hours by the looks of it, and his constitution had gradually cleansed his body during that time. Only then did he get a proper look at the surroundings, and he had to admit it was quite beautiful.

The place reminded Zac a lot of the life-attuned side of his cultivation cave. The ceiling and walls were absolutely

covered in various plants emitting strong life-attuned energies. It wasn't a surprise. The Living Pulse ran straight through these subterranean tunnels, and the ambient energy was absolutely chock-full of Divine Energy in addition to Twilight Energy.

Still, the beauty didn't much help with his predicament, and Zac grunted as he got back on his feet. His constitution was barely able to deal with the energy, feeling like he was standing in a field of poison. The sooner he got out of here, the better.

Cutting his way out was a possibility if all else failed, but he was afraid of cutting his way through the stone left and right. The Living Pulse had clearly split up into dozens, perhaps hundreds, of streams. What if he suddenly broke the wall and found himself caught by the stream again?

There was also Catheya and the others to consider. Catheya had definitely been swallowed up by the stream just like he was, and he wouldn't be too surprised if the same was true for the others. He took out the tracking array. No response. He sighed in disappointment. Perhaps the streams of the Living Pulse created some sort of interference, or perhaps...

Not everyone was as durable as he was, nor as able to deal with this kind of environment.

He went with his gut as he started to make his way forward in search of either his companions or a way out, harvesting all kinds of weird herbs on the way. The energy was dense, and it wasn't easy to get here. That was a perfect combination for rare herbs and treasures to appear. Zac figured he might as well make the best of a bad situation.

There was a clause in his employment contract that said all obligations were voided if a situation like this arose, as long as the group couldn't re-form within a week. There was a very real chance his shot at the Life-Death Pearls was gone, but he would do his best to find at least Catheya before giving up.

The subterranean tunnels were a hidden repository of wealth, and Zac gained herbs valued at over fifty thousand E-

grade Nexus Coins in just over an hour. Most of them were only useful for the living, but that was just fine with Zac. Unfortunately, none of the items he'd found were any real treasures.

After four hours he sensed something odd. A blistering cold. There was no reason for such glacial cold to be this far underground, and a wave of relief hit him as he followed the clues into another cave.

Inside was a wretched-looking Catheya encased in a four-meter block of ice.

TRAITOR

Catheya's left arm was broken, and multiple wounds covered her body. Her complexion was pallid even for a Draugr, and Zac sensed her aura was very unstable. She neither had his durability nor the ability to deal with the dense life-attuned energies, from what he understood.

Encasing herself in ice was probably a desperate measure of hers to block out the surrounding energies, but it was just a stopgap. The block of ice was bobbing in a lake full of life-attuned energies, and it was gradually being whittled down.

Zac wasn't exactly sure how he could help with her situation. He began by lifting the block out of the water and carrying it over to an adjoining cave that wasn't submerged. He put Catheya in the middle before taking out a series of arrays. One was a dispenser array he'd prepared for when he would travel alone.

He placed it around the ice and put a series of Supreme-quality Miasma Crystals into it. Soon enough, the block was covered in dense clouds of Miasma. The array didn't really purify the Twilight Energy like Catheya's array did, but it did push some away. It was the most common way to deal with the Twilight Energy, and also far more expensive to run compared to Catheya's.

In fact, such an array wasn't publicly available.

Zac himself sat down facing Catheya within the ice, and he essentially used himself as a purification array by absorbing some of the Twilight Energy close by. The hours passed, and

Zac put one Miasma Crystal after another into the array as he waited. Sitting inside the cloud did a lot of good for him, and after the better part of a day, he was pretty much back in prime condition.

Catheya's aura was slowly growing stable, partly thanks to Zac occasionally crushing Soul Crystals in addition to the Miasma Crystals. Finally, she opened her eyes, and Zac felt a twinge of danger prompting him to jump out of the way. It was just in time, as the ice exploded, launching shards in all directions like a cluster bomb.

Thankfully he'd reacted in time, and a coffin-shaped barrier blocked the fallout. His array wasn't so lucky, and Zac grimaced when the Miasmatic cloud dispersed.

"You owe me an array, you know," Zac said with a grimace.

"You! Stay back!" she answered with a ferocious glint in her eyes as a spike appeared in her hand.

"What's the matter with you? What the hell happened?" Zac sighed, following Catheya's instructions.

It really looked like Catheya would attack him if he went any closer, and he was in no mood for a fight.

"You think there was a traitor?" Zac said, soon understanding why she was so standoffish.

"You, Sharpo, or Yod. One of you three did this," she said.

"Well, Sharpo or Yod," Zac corrected.

"Oh, I should just take your word for it?" she snorted.

"I mean, you were standing right in front of me. I was the first one to get screwed over," Zac said with exasperation. "Besides, I dragged you out of the water and spent a small fortune to block out the surrounding energies."

Catheya stared at him then snorted, putting away her spike. "Well, I'm pretty sure it's not you. For one, you have a connection to my ancestor. Secondly, I honestly doubt you'd have the skill to fiddle with arrays without me or Varo noticing."

“Well, whatever,” Zac said, a bit miffed at being looked down on. Even if it was true. “I’m still young. I have plenty of time to pick up side skills.”

Catheya laughed, but her face froze into a grimace as she looked down at her arm. She took out a pill and swallowed it, closing her eyes for a few seconds before looking up at Zac with an unusually serious expression. “Thank you, I owe you my life. And I’m sorry about just now. I wasn’t in my right mind when I woke up, and I panicked when sensing a strong aura right next to me.”

“Well, don’t sweat it.” Zac shrugged. “Though you do owe me for the array.”

“How can someone be such a miser when walking around with enough wealth to topple nations.” Catheya wryly smiled, taking out an array that seemed even better than the one Zac had used. “Here.”

“Great.” Zac smiled, stowing away the array. “Now, do you know how to get out of here?”

“This is a repeater point of the Living Pulse, where it goes below ground and then reemerges stronger.” Catheya sighed. “It was actually our next stop, but we obviously weren’t supposed to enter this way. Or go this deep.”

“So we just need to make our way up?” Zac muttered.

“Wait,” Catheya said as she took out a black core.

Zac recognized it. Seeing as it was the gathering array meant for when they arrived in this place.

“There’s another mark down here,” Catheya said.

“Wait, it works?” Zac said with confusion as he took out his shard. Still nothing. “I think mine broke.”

“I obviously deactivated the daughter-arrays after realizing there was a traitor among us,” Catheya snorted. “There weren’t any signals active when I was forced to seal myself though. How long have we been down here?”

“Oh, right,” Zac said. “We’ve been here around two days now. I was knocked out. Took me a while to find you and

stabilize your aura.”

“Two days,” Catheya muttered. “I doubt the traitor allowed themselves to get caught by the stream and dragged down, but it’s more than enough time to get down here through the tunnel system. Even if they did, would they take out the tracking array like this?”

“Could be a trap,” Zac said.

“Either it’s one of our people who needs rescue, or it’s the traitor trying to lure us out. In either case, we should check it out,” Catheya said, a ruthless gleam shimmering in her abyssal eyes.

Zac hesitated but eventually nodded. He wouldn’t mind getting some revenge on the person who almost got him killed. But there were some things he needed to make sure of first.

“Are you still able to locate the Life-Death Pearls?” Zac asked.

If she couldn’t, then it might be better setting off on his own. This traitor was probably connected to Catheya’s mission, and there was no point getting involved if there weren’t benefits to match. Especially considering Catheya’s current condition. Her aura had stabilized, but she was still wounded and heavily suppressed by the area. He would definitely have to do the heavy lifting in any clashes.

“Of course, that had no connection to the submersible,” Catheya said. “And the reward has only increased. There’s at least one traitor, and there might be casualties among the others. Setting off alone now would be a mistake.”

“Right, let’s go get that scoundrel,” Zac immediately agreed.

“You know, next time you can at least pretend you’re helping out of gentlemanly convictions rather than greed,” Catheya muttered as they set out toward the source of the signal.

“Like you’d buy something like that,” Zac retorted with a smile.

Sometimes they had to descend into submerged tunnels to continue, and they were teeming with plant life to the point they couldn't even see the walls. Corals, seaweed, large luminous fungi, and all kinds of underwater plants fought for space along the walls. There were also many types of smaller animals flitting about, all of them leaning toward life rather than death.

"This place." Catheya sighed, taking out a Miasma Crystal.

"Why not take out the purification array?" Zac asked.

"I don't have it," Catheya said with a helpless shake of her head. "It was connected to the submersible when it broke apart, and the core was far from your room. Varo should have been sitting right next to it though. Hopefully, he managed to take it."

"That's a shame," Zac muttered.

"Is it?" she said with a penetrating look. "For some reason, it looks like you're absolutely fine walking in this poisonous environment. Come to think of it, it was the same while you fought next to the mothertree. Did my ancestor provide something for protection? Can you share?"

"There's nothing like that." Zac coughed. "I'm simply a bit more durable than you. Besides, I wasn't really hurt on the way down here."

"Right," Catheya muttered.

Catheya kept taking out one crystal after another to withstand the poisonous energies burrowing into her body, but Zac could see how she was struggling even with that. Zac couldn't be certain, but he believed she wouldn't even be able to exhibit half her normal strength in a place like this, and that was in her prime condition.

It was no wonder the undead usually stayed away from the Living Pulse. The restrictions on them were a lot greater here, and they were probably lessened for the living.

"The signal started moving," Catheya said with a small frown. "Away from us."

“They might have decided to find their way out,” Zac commented.

The two kept going for another twenty minutes, at which point the signal stopped again, according to Catheya. Even before, it hadn't moved very fast, meaning the person on the other end might be in a bad way. It lent some credence to the theory that it was someone else who'd been dragged down by the Living Pulse rather than descended through the tunnels. If it was Sharpo, an intangible death-attuned ghost, she might be on the brink of collapse.

Soon they closed in on the source of the marker, and it seemed to come from a large cave teeming with life.

“Ready yourself,” Catheya whispered as she ate what looked like a soldier pill to boost her energy reserves.

Zac nodded. Then he inwardly groaned, remembering he'd lost [**Rakan's Roar**] to the Living Pulse. He was pretty reluctant to take out [**Verun's Bite**] in front of Catheya unless absolutely necessary, so he ultimately just transformed [**Love's Bond**] to its backpack form and took out a random spare axe. A moment later they entered the cave, and the scene inside was both beautiful and haunting.

An unmoving body lay on the ground in a vast field of flowers: Yod.

A shimmering haze covered the whole cave, like motes of starlight. There was also a corpse lying a few meters away from Yod. A single glance indicated that the man had died not long ago, and the wounds on his body indicated that Yod was responsible for his death. There were also scars and burnt patches all over the cavern, indicating a heated battle.

Had they met by chance in this place and a brutal battle had ensued?

“It's really Yod,” Catheya whispered. “He looks hurt.”

“Are the flowers safe?” Zac asked hesitantly.

“Should be. I'm pretty sure they're Vigorbloom Lilacs,” Catheya muttered.

Zac remembered the plant, and he took out one of his compendiums to confirm. The image matched perfectly, and the description made Zac breathe out in relief. These flowers weren't poisonous, but rather medicine. They were the main component for creating some berserking pills for Dreamers, but their scarcity which made the recipe unpopular. As for the unliving, their only value was resale.

"There might be more ambushers," Catheya added with a pointed look.

Zac nodded, and activated [**Profane Exponents**] as though he were afraid of ambush rather than leery about Yod himself. They edged closer, and Zac frowned at the haze around them. It felt wrong. But his danger sense didn't give off any warning, so he followed Catheya to the core.

"We need to get him out of this place," Zac said. "With his wounds, it might be lethal to stay this close to a bunch of Spirit Herbs."

"I—" Catheya said, but the words got caught in her throat as she slumped down on the ground.

Zac's eyes widened in alarm when a wave of vertigo hit him before he had a chance to escape, and he found himself on the ground as well. Zac tried to get back on his feet, but something was wrong with the Miasma in his body. It had frozen. Like the ichor had been turned to lead.

On a second look, there were small white motes inside his veins, and it was these pollutants that seemed to have caused such a massive change. Zac didn't get it. His danger sense hadn't sensed anything amiss, and the plants should be benign. There also weren't any suspicious energy fluctuations.

Yet he hadn't noticed the infiltration at all. Normally, [**Purity of the Void**] would have been able to deal with this issue. Only, it was already busy dealing with the large amounts of life-attuned energies.

The problem wasn't only that he was completely unable to circulate his Miasma, it was like his whole body was frozen in place. He wasn't even able to move enough to put an antidote

pill into his mouth. He wasn't able to drag himself to safety with the help of his Tool Spirit either. The chains required a little bit of his energy to control, and he couldn't even give them that.

"What is this? What's going on?" Zac grunted with a slurred voice as he tried to shake himself loose.

Catheya didn't even get the chance to respond before Zac felt a ruthless pull as his pores started to leak massive amounts of Miasma. He was lying face-to-face with Catheya. She was in a similar situation, her eyes wide with shock. Their energies merged in the air before they were dragged to a small sphere he hadn't noticed before.

Zac tried to forcibly keep the energy in his body and resist the drain, but he was only able to slightly slow down the speed at which he lost energy.

A muffled snicker echoed out from behind him, and Zac recognized it to be Yod's voice.

"It's futile," Yod grunted, his voice just as slurred as Zac's own. "Even a Hegemon would find themselves locked down for a while with my preparations. You'll be drained long before your body acclimatizes to the poison here."

"You lunatic, you used yourself as bait to trap us?" Zac spat.

"Hardly. Would I be in this wretched state if this bastard hadn't appeared out of nowhere and wounded me? It's worth it if I can take both of you imperial bastards out. I'll recover in a month or two."

"How is this possible?" Catheya wheezed. "Is it not Vigorbloom Lilacs?"

"I'm not surprised you outsiders don't know," Yod grunted with a laugh. "You didn't misidentify the lilacs, but there are some things the missives won't tell you. They release a pollen that perfectly blends with the Twilight Energy and burrows into the bodies of others. It might be medicine for the Dreamers, but for us, it'll cause a little-known reaction if

concentrated enough. Our order has used it for assassination for tens of thousands of years.”

Zac tried one thing after another, but nothing he did worked. He could use his mental energy just fine, but there was nothing to channel it into. He could feel [**Force of the Void**], but it was like his skill fractals were blocked out by the pollen, making him unable to activate [**Abyssal Phase**]. Catheya didn't seem to have any luck either, rendering them to helplessly look at each other.

“It's lucky. I planned on finishing you off, but Arcaz had already found you by the time I did. I planned on giving up until I found this place by chance,” Yod grunted. “The rewards I'll gain for stopping you will be shocking.”

It looked like Yod had been a spy all along, working for some mysterious order. Not only that, it even seemed as though he was a proper Array Master, something he hadn't shown any indication of at all until now. He had the ability to tinker with the submersible, and could also manipulate Catheya's tracker while setting up this trap.

It looked like Catheya's mission had been leaked, considering Yod had been placed by her side even before they entered. Was it Yod who took out Ravan as well? Or perhaps he'd just divulged the locations of the people. Varo had barely survived, even though he was an assassin who should excel at stealth.

As for why Yod was doing this, it was clearly linked to their mission. He'd been unable to hinder them at the first two locations, though it was a bit suspicious how quickly they'd been spotted by those crabs, now that Zac thought of it. Perhaps Yod felt forced to take action as they closed in on the third spot without any major issues, and he'd forcibly steered the submarine into the Living Pulse.

“I can pay you ten thousand D-grade Nexus Coins to let us out of here,” Zac sighed. “I'm sure that's more than what your employers are paying you.”

“I have a ticket to the empire as well,” Catheya hurriedly added with a weak voice.

The Corpselord didn't bother to respond, and Zac was starting to get worried for real. Not for himself. **[Purity of the Void]** was continuously cleansing some of the pollen that had burrowed into his body, and he should be able to leave here on his own. Besides, even if he was drained of Miasma, he would just revert to his human form.

But Catheya didn't have that kind of luxury. Running out of Miasma was a death sentence for her. What would happen to the brand hidden in his body if Catheya died right in front of him? Were there hidden measures added to its core functionality? Zac hesitated as he looked at the rapidly paling Catheya.

"Uh, if you're going to do something, could you do it now?" Catheya said, her voice shaking a bit. "I have just a few minutes remaining before I enter my final slumber."

Zac wanted to help, but the problem was whether he could. The Duplicity Core needed some energy to activate now that it was sealed. He couldn't infuse anything at all. But he did have his bloodline talent available, and his Specialty Core was no doubt protected from the pollen thanks to Leandra's array.

It should work.

"Oh well," Zac sighed as the cage to his Duplicity Core snapped.

TRUTHS AND CONSPIRACIES

It worked. The energy from **[Force of the Void]** had no problems undoing the bindings from Leandra's obfuscation array, and the Duplicity Core returned to plain view in Zac's inner sight. He wasted no time and activated the core in case the pollen could hamper the process.

Zac felt the familiar wave of weakness, followed by an exuberant vigor as his cells were filled with energy. It was just as he'd expected. The weird pollen surged through his veins and he almost felt like he'd eaten a berserking pill or an aphrodisiac. His Cosmic Energy raged through his body, and he was suddenly ready to take on the world.

But before the world, there were some immediate issues to remedy. The energies in the room churned as Zac's aura exploded outward, neither constricted by arrays, lilacs, or the Mystic Realm itself. Zac heard a groan from Yod's direction, though he was more concerned with dealing with the weird array sucking the death out of Catheya. His old companion appeared in his hand as he stood up, and Zac felt whole again. In a way he'd never felt while wielding **[Rakan's Roar]**.

"Impossible!" Yod screamed when he saw Zac ignore the effect of both the pollen and arrays. Zac disregarded the traitor's screams as he swung at the ceiling, sending out a series of silvery fractal leaves.

A barrier sprang up to protect the draining sphere, but it was shredded in an instant thanks to the enormous power in his Peak-mastery Fragment. The pull of Miasma stopped,

though that didn't mean Catheya was completely out of the woods.

As for the Draugr, she looked up at Zac with mute incomprehension as he walked over and stuffed a soldier pill into her mouth and a Miasma Crystal into her hand before gently lifting her up to place her back against a rock. Yod didn't get quite as gentle a treatment. Zac simply grabbed one of his legs and dragged him over.

The two unliving were still completely immobilized by the pollen, giving Zac a moment to sort things out. How to deal with Catheya was a real conundrum, but his attention first turned to the traitor of the group.

"You... What's going on?" Yod stammered. "You're a Dreamer? No, that's impossible."

Catheya's face kept changing expressions, like her mind had short-circuited from trying to reconcile all the snippets of information she had on his two identities. Yod might not know who stood in front of him, but Catheya surely did. After all, **[Million Faces]** had deactivated the moment he swapped race.

"Don't sweat the details. I just happen to be a Draugr with some special abilities. Why are you doing this?" Zac asked with a frown. "Couldn't you have waited to attack Catheya until after we got the pearls? Why involve me?"

"What the heck?" Catheya blurted, finally waking up from her shock.

"Why am I doing this!" Yod growled, rage overcoming his fear and confusion. "Do you even know what you're doing? What the goal of your little side mission is? You're trying to destroy Twilight Harbor! I'd take you out even if I have to die with you. Ten thousand Nexus Coins compared to trillions of lives? Go screw yourselves!"

"A bit bombastic, aren't we?" Zac snorted, though he could sense some hesitation coming from Catheya.

"You outsiders!" Yod spat. "You come to our homes and bleed our resources dry! And that's not enough! You even want to detonate Twilight Harbor so that some big shots can

harvest the resources in its depths! I guess you got tired of slowly siphoning our wealth, huh?"

"What? Detonate the whole place?" Zac exclaimed. "What about the other participants?"

"What about them? What are the lives of some frontiers to the vaunted B-grade empires?" Yod snorted.

"He's lying," Catheya said. "My master wouldn't sacrifice me even if the plan is true."

"Where did you hear this?" Zac asked Yod. "Who is this order you mentioned?"

"I wouldn't tell you even if I could. Go ahead, kill me. There are more like me who will give everything to save our home," Yod said before he closed his eyes.

"Well, whatever," Zac snorted as [Verun's Bite] ripped through the air.

A muffled thud echoed out through the cave as Yod's head was cut clean off and fell into the field of flowers. Zac looted any items of interest on his body before he stowed it away. He wouldn't be able to turn it to make another follower, but he didn't want to leave any clues behind.

Zac turned back to Catheya, who silently looked on with a complicated gaze.

"It's you after all," Catheya sighed.

"It's me." Zac shrugged.

There was no point in denying it. Even if his disguise skill had worked across transformations, there was no way she wouldn't make the connection when he suddenly turned into someone living. His best disguise was the simple fact that you couldn't be both alive and dead, and he'd already proven that to be false.

"The question is how we'll go forward from here," Zac continued as he tried to gain any clues as to what Catheya was thinking.

Unfortunately, she didn't divulge much. Her face was a calm mask now, though he could still sense some confusion and curiosity. There weren't any hints of repulsion or hate, like his transformation was heresy to the Draugr race. Then again, she would probably keep any such thoughts deep in her heart in a precarious situation like this.

"What do you want?" Catheya asked.

"Let me think for a bit," Zac muttered as he sat down in front of her.

There was certainly the issue of her master's brand and his contract to take into consideration, but the simple fact was that Zac was unwilling to let Catheya die when he could so easily save her. She had her own goals and ambitions, but she'd been nothing but helpful to him since the first time they met.

She'd helped him in the Base Town, and she never seemed to act against him during the months they worked together. Overall, he felt she was a good person, and Zac couldn't just stand by while she died. At the same time, it left him with a mess on his hands.

Catheya wasn't biased against the living, but she was ultimately a citizen of the Undead Empire. Now that she had this information, how would she act? Forming a Contract of Binding like with the Valkyries was out of the question since she had a higher level than him, and a simple contract like the employment contract wasn't strong enough to guarantee much of anything in the long run.

"You're worried I'll spread this unique ability of yours to my people back home. That this ability will implicate you and your close ones," she slowly said. "You don't need to worry."

"Well, that's a relief," Zac said with a roll of his eyes. "Care to explain why?"

"Why would I?" Catheya said. "I have absolutely nothing to gain from betraying you. More importantly, I'm not some ingrate who places wealth above my comrades. Besides, what are you even worried about? If the empire found out about

your situation, you'd be invited with open arms and heavily nurtured."

"Or I'd get dissected because some old monster got curious," Zac snorted.

"There's no way the princes would allow that," Catheya said. "Do you think the empire hasn't tried? Undead who can transform and absorb Cosmic Energy when there's no Miasma around? Who can eat the vast number of treasures only Dreamers can digest? If it was possible to accomplish something like this with any certainty, we would have figured it out billions of years ago. I bet you're a freak of nature that can't be replicated, like so many other Heaven's Chosen through the ages."

"Still," Zac muttered, though her points made some sense.

"Could you move me a bit farther from these infernal flowers while we discuss this?" she asked.

"Not just yet." Zac smiled.

"And can I ask why not?" Catheya sighed. "I truly have no interest in divulging your secrets, whatever they are. Why would I? You're clearly connected to my ancestor, and I don't think it's a simple connection if what you said about her husband is true. If anything, I might just bring trouble down on my own head if I somehow ruin the plans of my ancestor. We're on the same side here."

"Not betraying your benefactor's secrets is just a matter of course," Zac countered. "There are also the issues of guarantees and remuneration."

"A real benefactor wouldn't keep their beneficiary captured in a poison mist to extract them of valuables," Catheya said with a raised brow.

"Well, the Heavens are ruthless and all that." Zac shrugged. "Life is hard, and I need to fight for all the benefits I can get."

"Yeah, your life looked really hard when you outspent Hegemons left and right," Catheya snorted before her brows scrunched up. "Wait! Where did your money come from? I

discounted you being a progenitor because of your wealth, but now you're really one? What's going on!"

"That's what's important now?" Zac asked, but Catheya was obviously in full calculation mode.

"Alive and dead... Annihilation... Aetherlord husband," Catheya muttered.

Zac listened with confusion. Even he was a bit curious what kind of crackpot theory she was cooking up. Unfortunately for her, she was doomed to miss the mark, considering she was lacking a few key pieces of information.

"Ancestor walked the path of pure Death, and the aura your follower emitted... Master said it had a hint of Oblivion. She must have made a breakthrough, which allowed her to live until now. Her husband is an Aetherlord, a rare race blessed by unusual attunement to life," Catheya said, her eyes boring into Zac's. "You are a mix of life and death... Are you... Ancestor Be'Zi's son? Are we related?"

"You can call me Young Grand Ancestor." Zac nodded while also memorizing the key pieces of information she'd unwittingly divulged.

Catheya snorted and her brows scrunched up. "No wait, my master said you don't even have a hint of the Sharva'Zi bloodline. And I don't think you lied when you said you only met in a vision back in the Tower. Don't tell me you have even more big shots helping you out, giving you money? What are you, some sort of old monster magnet?"

Her face was a tapestry of fluctuating expressions as she tried to go over the various pieces of information she had on him. Zac inwardly groaned. She was getting a bit close to the truth with the latest guess. Of course, the fact that it was a Technocrat powerhouse, and his mother to boot, was probably not something she'd ever get right. Thankfully, Catheya soon calmed down.

"I guess I won't be able to figure it out unless you choose to tell me." She solemnly looked into his eyes. "You need to make a decision here."

Zac held her stare for a few seconds before he sighed and created a normal System-enforced mutual contract. It was straightforward enough, simply saying they couldn't divulge each other's hidden aces to any parties. Catheya immediately agreed to it with a small smile, and Zac carried her out of the field of Vigorbloom Lilacs.

Before leaving the area, he harvested the patch of flowers. Yod had probably extracted most of their medicinal value to set the trap, but there might still be some pollen left. It would be a waste to leave it behind. He took the array markers and the living cultivator's body as well before carrying Catheya away.

"There's still the matter of payment," Zac said after setting Catheya down in a cave some distance away from where they'd met Yod.

"Well, what do you want?" Catheya asked. "There's not much I have that I can give you. You're way wealthier than I am."

"I want information," Zac said.

"What kind?" Catheya countered.

"I want you to teach me all you know about raising undead, upgrading and modifying skills, and bloodline evolutions," Zac said.

"Why don't I just tell you the secrets of the Heavens themselves while I'm at it?" Catheya said with exasperation.

"You know, Yod ran into one living cultivator. I bet there are more around," Zac said as he took out a few Vigorbloom Lilacs. "Perhaps they would be more amenable to helping out if the immobilized Draugr they found presented them with a bouquet."

"Fine, fine," Catheya said with a glare. "I'll teach you what I can, but I have restrictions I can't break. Draugr bloodline methods are completely off-limits. I can teach you a bit about skill evolutions and my necromancy knowledge. Gods, you're so weird. You're extremely powerful and

disgustingly wealthy, but you're barely above a newborn in knowledge."

"Well, we all have our weaknesses." Zac smiled.

"Hah, right," Catheya snorted before her eyes widened, and her volume increased as it looked like she'd just received her biggest shock yet. "Wait! The amulet you bought, it's for you! You're a mortal! A Draugr mortal? That's impossible! Absolutely impossible!"

"No wonder you were ready to enrage a Monarch, it's for your cultivation. With your accumulations, breaking a node must be like dancing with death," Catheya muttered. "I can't wrap my head around this."

"Then don't. Focus on building a curriculum for me instead," Zac said with exasperation.

"Only after we leave this place. You haven't really saved me yet," Catheya said. "I'm weakened by the environment, restricted by those cursed flowers."

"Alright, fair enough," Zac agreed.

"You actually are a Draugr since you want manuals? You're not just pretending?" Catheya asked as she looked him up and down curiously. "Or is the current you the fake? No, that's not right either. I've seen you fight in both forms."

"Zac, Arcaz. I'm both, alright?" Zac grunted. "How it works is my business."

"What do I call you?" she asked curiously.

"Up to you," Zac said after some thought, afraid to give up even more information by saying a specific name.

"Mr. Deviant Asura, then," Catheya said as a smile spread across her face. "You know, I think I get it now. You've channeled all your libido to one of your personas. That's why you're such a blockhead in your Draugr form and a deviant in the other. It's a relief. I was starting to worry I'd really overestimated my charms."

"What deviant," Zac groaned with annoyance and embarrassment. He thought Catheya had left Zecia before that

moniker was coined, but it looked like he wasn't so lucky. "That title is just something some jerk came up with based on some misunderstandings and exaggerations. Probably a friend of someone I killed in the Base Town. Just call me Zac in this form and Arcaz in the other, okay?"

"Fine. There were a lot of those little misunderstandings, from what I heard though," Catheya said with a pointed look. "And I do believe I remember you appearing from the Tower of Eternity in enough jewelry to make an imperial concubine jealous."

"I knew a bunch of people would be waiting outside because of the quest, and I got those items from a powerful cultivator in the Battle of Fates I mentioned. What was I supposed to do? Get myself killed because looking proper is more important?" Zac muttered.

Catheya snickered, but she thankfully dropped the subject. It looked like she'd regained her humor now that her life wasn't in immediate danger.

Zac knew he was going out on a limb here, but he didn't know what else to do. He couldn't go around killing and silencing everyone, even friends, who found out about his Specialty Core. Being in a constant state of fear and paranoia was no way to live. Staying cautious was important, he just couldn't let his secrets define him. It was that kind of secrecy on his part that ultimately led to the death of Thea, though his mother was obviously more in the wrong.

Part of him still wanted to bring Catheya back to Earth to ensure she couldn't spread the news. It would be nigh impossible to enforce that though. It wasn't like Zac could stuff her in a coffin, like Ogras had with Emma and make it all the way to the teleporters before getting stopped. Catheya's master had definitely placed a marker on her for safety.

This was a gamble of sorts. The same one he'd taken with Ogras four years ago. If things worked out, you could say he had another companion he could trust his back to, and one with access to the Undead Empire at that. If things went south,

he would at least get some benefits from the disaster before fleeing.

He would probably have to adjust his plans for the trial. Escaping a few months early in human form seemed to be the safest bet going forward.

“You know, this makes me half your master,” Catheya suddenly said with a wide smile.

Zac was about to counter her point, but he got distracted as a screen appeared in front of him.

[Monthly Contribution Ladder]

932,032 Uona Noz’Valadir

861,864 Ykrodas Havarok

682,248 Haldur

621,338 Dravzur Kuldaz

598,654 Kataron Rissit

596,211 Aia Ouro

582,852 Drogrid Rotheart

572,973 Kerstin Agda

521,426 Kvistir

518,195 Alduz Venarun

...

224,338 Gembur Bloomroot

YOUNG MONSTERS

“It’s a monthly ladder. I wonder if there are any benefits in being on it,” Catheya said.

Zac barely heard her as he read through the list.

“What the hell?” Zac eventually blurted, far more interested in the top names than anything else. “How do those two have so many points?”

Every single person on the ladder was a real terror. He was confounded on how two people gained over 800,000 contribution points. Even if they’d immediately formed a Middle-stage Dao Branch after entering, they’d still need to accumulate another 300,000 points from somewhere. Just how many people had these two killed?

Maybe they actually had one Middle-stage Dao Branch already and evolved a second one? That way they’d have 750,000 contribution points in total. Still, there was a long way between 750,000 and 932,032 points, which made Zac wonder just what kind of being she was. He recognized four names in the top-ten from his missives or through their surnames, but a full six of them were completely unknown.

That by itself indicated that this trial was uncommon. One or two supreme elites might appear from the outside for a Twilight Ascent, but six? Furthermore, one of the four names he recognized was Ykrodas Havarok, who was obviously an outsider as well.

The general power was beyond Zac’s expectations. Eighty people in the top one hundred had over 250,000 contribution

points, which meant there might actually be eighty of them with Middle-stage Dao Branches. That might not sound like a lot, but it was extremely hard to reach that point from what Zac had gathered.

It put extreme requirements on affinity in general. More important was the time it took. Forming a Dao Branch by itself was extremely challenging, and many required thousands of years to reach that point. Even among those who had the talent to accomplish something like that, most simply stopped at an Early Branch or even Peak Dao Fragment before evolving.

Spending centuries on one's Dao in the E-grade was only something you did if you were completely out of options, since doing so would rob you of your momentum. Zac doubted someone like a Havarok princeling would harm his future like that. This Ykrodas might be Zac's age or even younger, which made his accomplishments even scarier.

Furthermore, the people on the list were those who'd formed multiple life or death-aspected Dao Branches. There were probably a large number of cultivators who were just as powerful as these Rankers, who followed different paths. Some of the Rankers might also hold secondary Daos like he and Catheya.

He'd been pretty confident after seeing his contribution approach fifty thousand the other day. Seeing this list was a harsh wake-up call. Even Yanub Mettleleaf should be pretty far off from being able to enter this group.

"Uona..." Catheya muttered with a frown.

"Do you know that person?" Zac asked.

"Not really. She should be part of the Eternal Clan, judging by her surname." Catheya sighed. "And I think Aia Ouro is a pureblood Eidolon."

"Can you tell me about the Eternal Clan without breaking apart?" Zac asked curiously.

"Sure. Their situation is a bit special. You could say they form an independent enclave of the empire with their own

territories and laws, and they're not really protected by the commands."

"And the Primo simply accepts an independent force like that?" Zac asked.

"Apart from the Primo, the Eternal Clan has the strongest cultivator. That affords them some special benefits," Catheya explained. "What do you want to know?"

"Are they really vampires?" Zac asked curiously.

"Vampires?"

"Bloodsuckers," he clarified. "The Nosferatu."

"Noz'Feratu? I think that's one of their older branches." Catheya nodded with some confusion. "And yes, 'bloodsuckers' is an apt description. They're pretty unique in that way. Drinking the blood of Cultivators is a form of cultivation for them. They can absorb some of their essences, making High-quality blood something like a mix of a Dao Treasure and Miasma Crystals."

"A bloodline talent?" Zac asked.

"Apparently not," Catheya said with a shake of her head. "They sometimes enlist elites to bolster their ranks, and they gain this ability as well. Many have tried to figure out how it works, but no one has succeeded. The method is tightly controlled by their clan. One thing is for sure, it's a sinister method. Those who get drained essentially get crippled even if they survive."

"Isn't that an unorthodox path?" Zac asked hesitantly. "Robbing the cultivation of others."

"It doesn't look that way. The System doesn't seem to mind, but that might be thanks to the Blood Progenitor rather than whether it's unorthodox or not. It makes them an enemy of all living factions though, as they see Dreamers as food. That's how they came to us. They were being pushed pretty hard in the early days of the System by a coalition led by the Buddhist Sangha, and sought refuge with us," Catheya explained.

“The Buddhist Sangha?” Zac asked.

“Nine mountains, eight temples, four oceans, and one paradise,” Catheya said, some dread evident in her eyes. “The Buddhist Sangha is one of the true peak factions in the Multiverse, eclipsing even the Undead Empire.”

“What!” Zac exclaimed with shock. “Why haven’t I heard of them, then?”

“They live far from the frontier and mostly keep to themselves,” Catheya said. “They cultivate the heart more than anything else, and seldom leave their temples. But when they get angry, they really hold a grudge. Two of their temples are still fighting with the Eternal Clan to this day.”

“Two out of eight temples are as powerful as the Eternal Clan? And they have a bunch of other things on top of that?” Zac asked.

“They’re a scary bunch.” Catheya nodded.

Zac wondered if that was where Abbot Everlasting Peace had been taken by 84th Fatty. Perhaps his original form was part of one of those Buddhist factions on the other side of the Multiverse. It also made him think of himself and his Fragment of the Bodhi. The Buddhist lands would probably be a pretty amazing place to look for opportunities for his life-aspected half. His class was even named after Arcadia.

For now, learning about the Eternal Clan was more pressing if there was a bunch of bloodsuckers stalking the Twilight Ocean, with one of them being absurdly powerful.

“The Eternal Clan don’t eat the undead?” Zac asked.

“They can.” Catheya grimaced. “But our ichor apparently tastes beyond appalling. Like rotten food for the living. They wouldn’t dare drink our blood in either case. It’s one of the core agreements for them to join our side. Anyway, you need to watch out for those people, not just Uona. I think they might be a bit like you.”

“Like me?” Zac asked with confusion.

“You’re both living and dead. They are the opposite in a sense; they’re not dead, but they’re not technically living either. They’ve fused Miasma and their Blood Power into something unique,” Catheya said, making Zac’s eyes widen a bit. “I don’t think they’re as suppressed as others inside this place thanks to that.”

“What cheat-like existences,” Zac muttered with disgust.

“Like you’re one to talk,” Catheya snorted. “Well, there is some balance to it. Their numbers are thankfully pretty low, all things considered.”

Zac wasn’t surprised. What with there seeming to be a direct correlation between inborn power and the ability to pass that power on to the next generation.

“What about the other races? I haven’t even seen any Reavers in Twilight Harbor, I think? At least no pureblood ones,” Zac asked. “The closest is the Venarun Clan.”

“You really don’t know anything about your heritage?” Catheya asked suspiciously. “The more I learn about you, the weirder you get. I can’t divulge much about the empire, but you could say that the four races were put in charge of four cardinal directions. The Reavers are focusing on other fronts, while this sector and Zecia are technically part of the Draugr domains, though that’s naturally contested by the living. However, smaller clans sometimes send delegates to the frontier sectors to make some money.”

Zac understood. It looked like the closest undead kingdom was ruled by Draugr, allowing Catheya’s clan to move freely. Meanwhile, the Eidolon had to go through the Karabas Clan, while some Reaver faction garnered secret deals with Venarun Clan.

Catheya wouldn’t be able to divulge much more about the empire, so Zac focused his attention elsewhere. “What do you think about what Yod said? Are we really destroying this realm?”

“I haven’t heard of any such plans, but it’s not impossible,” Catheya admitted. “This Mystic Realm is really

odd, and the controlling factions may have set their sights on it. Whatever is creating the Twilight Energy has to be something pretty unique.”

“Then shouldn’t we stop the mission?” Zac said. “I don’t want to be responsible for something like destroying the harbor.”

“We’re just a small cog in the machine,” Catheya said. “I bet there are hundreds of squads like us if what Yod said was true. We’re just slightly influencing a few nodes. People have done much crazier things in the Twilight Ocean over the past eons without causing a stir. Besides, it’s not like we can stop. I have my contract and so do you.”

Zac grimaced with annoyance, but he slowly nodded in agreement. It was true, with him and Catheya reuniting, he was still technically on the job. There was also the egg in his Spatial Ring that needed to be delivered no matter what. Only now, it felt even more likely he was carrying some sort of bomb.

“It might be an exaggeration though. I doubt my master would send me inside if what Yod said was completely true. Also, destroying the Mystic Realm would cut off one of the most important revenue streams of my clan,” Catheya comforted. “Now, please let me rest for a while. I have a hard time rebuffing the Twilight Energy with this pollen inside me.”

“Alright,” Zac agreed as he took out a Supreme Nexus Crystal and started absorbing the energy.

It took almost a full day for Catheya to recover to the point that she could move again, and that was with Zac regularly flushing her body with his Fragment of the Coffin. Even then, it was just dealing with the restrictive properties of the Vigorbloom Lilacs. She was still heavily impacted by the atmosphere itself.

Apart from occasionally helping Catheya recover, he mostly focused on his own cultivation. Now that he’d been exposed, he might as well make use of the time to catch up. He constantly sat with Supreme Nexus Crystals in his hands to fill up the empty nodes in his body. Yod’s death had set the

foundation for one level, and the day of resting filled it up completely and then some.

Catheya occasionally looked up with a weird expression, clearly having some trouble reconciling the fact that a supposed Draugr was now happily sitting in the middle of dense life-attuned energies and absorbing Cosmic Energy.

Apart from the cultivation, he'd made an interesting discovery about himself. He looked better than before. He guessed it was a direct result of his Draugr race evolution since this was the first time he'd switched races or deactivated **[Million Faces]** since then. It was a welcome addition for sure, though he was more interested in the other benefits the Draugr evolution provided.

Unfortunately, it looked like the only other thing he gained from his odd situation was the additional layer of protection to his skin, rather than the improved pathways or energy reserves. Still, it was better than nothing, and indicated he might be able to find some synergy if he managed to train some constitution on his human side.

They eventually got ready to leave, and Zac turned to his employer for directions.

“Do you have any idea of how to get out of here?” Zac said. “I’m guessing you don’t want to stay in this environment longer than necessary.”

“Well, we were dragged farther down than we were supposed to go, but it shouldn’t be an issue,” Catheya said as she took out a small astrolabe. “This thing should help us find the node, and from there we just need to keep going up.”

“Alright.” Zac nodded as he got to his feet.

“Are you unable to change back into your undead form?” Catheya asked as she started walking in pace with Zac.

“Why would I change now just to get assaulted by the surroundings like you?” Zac asked.

“So you actually are affected by the environment,” Catheya muttered.

“Are you trying to figure out my weaknesses?” Zac asked with a pointed glance.

“No, I was just happy to hear the Heavens have eyes after all. Things started to feel a bit unfair. There are so many interesting places in the Multiverse, and you can visit them all while I’m relegated to a small corner.”

“A small corner that’s big enough to traverse for hundreds of thousands of years,” Zac countered, but he understood her point.

The Undead Empire was one of the largest factions of the Multiverse, but it was only so big compared to the endlessness of the Multiverse itself. There were probably numerous sections and dimensions where they had no presence at all, and going there as an undead was dangerous.

The astrolabe Catheya had prepared provided them with a general direction, but getting there was easier said than done with the unpredictable tunnels. One time they found themselves in a vast underwater lake, where Zac fought off a bunch of underwater dinosaurs, and they almost stumbled into the Living Pulse a few times. They kept going for another four hours, at which point Catheya stopped.

“I think it’s just ahead,” she said. “But there’s trouble. I can smell the lingering scent of the living. We might be too late.”

“Are they still here?” Zac asked.

“It doesn’t seem like it, but it’s impossible to tell for sure with all the interference in the atmosphere,” Catheya said. “I bet they moved on after installing some measure to block ours. Of course, the visitors may be normal trial-takers, people who have entered the caverns looking for valuables.”

“What’s the plan?” Zac asked as he tried to sense whether any people were present.

“I should be able to notice if the array works or not,” Catheya said. “If it’s been blocked, we simply move on. We’re not some deathsworn; no need to force it.”

“Good,” Zac said as he took out [Verun’s Bite] and slowly approached the mouth of the tunnel.

The inside was massive, with a ceiling height of over a hundred meters. The cave was the largest one they’d entered yet, and it was almost like entering a forest with how lush the vegetation was. There were clear signs of a large number of plants having been harvested, proving Catheya’s guess to be right. Thankfully, Zac couldn’t spot any who’d stayed behind.

Catheya crept up next to him, holding a Miasma Crystal to somewhat combat the extremely dense energies inside the cave. This was similar to the area around the mothertree. Something was clearly generating life force here, and the space was enclosed, trapping most of it inside.

Zac sensed a few weak fluctuations from Catheya, and she slowly nodded in confirmation that she couldn’t find anyone. They wordlessly entered the forest and proceeded with hurried steps until they reached the core.

There, a large boulder sat slightly embedded in the ground. It was roughly fifteen meters tall and almost thirty meters wide. That by itself wasn’t too interesting, except that it was covered in esoteric patterns that gave Zac the hint of life. It wasn’t something cultivators had added though. More like something natural similar to the patterns on the Stele of Conflict he’d witnessed in his Tower climb.

Another point was that the stone didn’t seem to be the same material as the endless tunnels they’d walked through. The stone was a unique deep yellow bordering on orange, while the stones in the tunnels were more of a garden-variety bedrock.

Had someone placed it here?

Zac tried to put it into his Cosmos Sack, but it didn’t budge. He pushed on it a bit next, but the only thing that happened was Catheya smacking his hand with an exasperated “tsk” before she started probing the stone. Several ice crystals flew around it as she made similar seals like when she’d worked the spike they used to kill the mothertree.

“It’s changed.” Catheya sighed. “I’m not sure what’s been done, but my preparations won’t work.”

“I could just break it?” Zac ventured, glancing at the “**10,000**” hovering above it.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.” A laugh reached them from behind, prompting both Zac and Catheya to swirl around in shock.

They found themselves in front of a group of six cultivators, not one of them appearing weak. They were living cultivators of human heritage, though they didn’t look exactly like any of the humans on Earth. Their hair was dark with a slight purplish tint, as were their irises. Their skin was olive, though it was a bit hard to tell with the extensive tattoos that covered their faces and arms.

“Havarok! Run!” Catheya whispered with urgency, and Zac wholly agreed.

UNPLUGGED

Zac knew he couldn't rely on Catheya at the moment. She'd expelled enough pollen to move freely, but there was enough left to restrict her abilities. Combined with her wounds and the environmental suppression, she was all but useless.

He wasn't confident in dealing with six Havarok imperials even if going all out. The leader was the biggest issue. His aura was beneath that of Yanub Mettleleaf back on Cork Island, but it was definitely above Zac's own. Also, in contrast to the slightly naïve treeman, this man gave Zac the impression of a veteran of a hundred battles with stable and congealed killing intent.

Thankfully there was no way Ykrodas Havarok, the second-place holder on the ladder, was part of this group, or any other of the Rankers for that matter. They were most likely some secondary squad who'd been sent here to deal with that rock. Zac grabbed Catheya as he activated **[Loamwalker]**, rushing around the rock to escape in the opposite direction of the squad.

"It's no use escaping," the man snorted as a shimmering dome enclosed the area five hundred meters around them.

Zac reached the barrier, immediately sensing it would take a while for him to break through it without laying a siege. Both he and Catheya threw out a general Array Breaker, and Zac swore when he saw them fail to find a chink in the armor.

"It's futile. After the chaos all along the Living Pulse, we figured someone would arrive sooner or later," the leader

continued, and Zac sighed as he turned around.

The Havarok soldiers had followed them at a leisurely pace, and now stood right between himself and the yellow rock. “I have turned this whole area into a sealed domain. If some general Array Breakers from the frontier could destroy our imperial arrays, wouldn’t it be a huge joke? I didn’t expect the group to look like yours. A human and a Draugr?”

Zac understood the man’s confusion. Mixed parties of both the living and undead were definitely uncommon, though not unheard of. But such a party wouldn’t head to a place like the Living Pulse at any rate. At least not unless they had some hidden objectives.

It was obvious this group was here on a mission just like they were. Even worse, it looked like they had opposing objectives. Zac couldn’t wait to be done with this mission and disappear into the ocean like some random trial-taker. He had no interest in making the Havarok Empire into an enemy.

“You’ve betrayed the living and led this person here?” another member of the group asked as she glared at Zac. “Do you know the ramifications of what you’re trying to do? Who you’re trying to help?”

Zac sighed, as she actually reminded him a bit of Thea. She had similar features, and even wore three thin swords on her back. One stark difference was the face tattoos, looking like a spiderweb of red fractals. He’d read about the Havarok Empire before, and it was much more militant in nature than the Radiant Temple or even the Undead Empire.

They weren’t like the Radiant Temple, who didn’t much care about their domain as long as they kept producing resources and talented seedlings. The Havarok Empire was one cohesive unit where strength trumped all. Even birthright to a certain degree.

The tattoos were a designation of sorts, telling a story of their exploits. Apparently, they weren’t completely cosmetic either, as the patterns formed proper arrays. Zac had almost gotten his hands on a similar method in the Tower of Eternity, but he’d ultimately given up on that method.

“I think this is all a misunderstanding,” Zac said with a light smile, though he didn’t relax in the slightest. “We’re just allies of circumstance. A series of unfortunate events brought both of us beneath the surface, and we decided to team up to find a way out of this place.”

“Well, it’s a possibility you’re telling the truth, though my gut says you’re lying.” The man smiled. “It is clear you’re not beyond redemption. Your class is related to nature, which means you’re not a traitor of life. A local guide, I assume? To help these Draugr abominations with their goals. You should know, whatever she’s paying you, it’s not enough. They want to destroy your home.”

“What do you propose?” Zac asked with a small frown.

“You should have known better than to intermingle with an imperial. The Draugr clans have destroyed thousands of worlds within the Havarok Empire alone, afflicting trillions with the curse of undeath. Some punishment is due, but I’m not unreasonable. I don’t think you’re part of this struggle. Hand her over, and you can leave after paying a ransom,” the man said. “90% should do. I’ll also give back half if you join us as a guide for three months.”

Collecting ransom was a pretty rare concept, at least in the frontiers. But it did work to a certain degree. After all, robbery of Nexus Coins was impossible, and extortionists would lose the money and even get fined if they didn’t honor their part of the agreement by killing or robbing the victim afterward. A small safeguard imposed on the System by the Apostate of Order.

In the frontier, people were pretty poor, so robbers targeted Cosmos Sacks and Spatial Rings instead in search of loot. Zac guessed the concept of ransom was more common in the Havarok Empire, where there were stricter rules and people had bigger wallets. The problem was, what did he mean by 90%? Were they actually expecting him to show his Status Screen?

That definitely couldn’t happen since he was sitting on over nine hundred thousand D-grade Nexus Coins.

“I accept.” Zac nodded with a fearful look as he took a few steps away from Catheya, causing her to look over with an open mouth. “I have three hundred thousand E-grade Nexus Coins on me. How about I—”

Zac didn’t get any farther before a massive hand appeared out of nowhere, radiating a terrifying might. There hadn’t been any fluctuations from either him or Catheya, which allowed him to catch the group unaware. They barely had time to look up before an enormous primal axe was upon them.

The stone edge was emitting a terrifyingly sharp gleam, infused with his recently upgraded Fragment of the Axe. If possible, he would have preferred to form one of his basic Dao Braids, but Zac was afraid that even the slightest delay would give these people the chance to turn things around.

“No!” the man roared as barriers sprang up above them, but how could hastily erected shields match up to a finisher conjured by almost a quarter of Zac’s energy reserves?

Another in the group was more decisive and crushed an escape talisman. However, it was clearly not a Supreme escape treasure, as the swirls of wind from the talisman didn’t even get the chance to swallow him up before Zac’s attack landed.

Four massive surges of energy entered his body as cultivators were turned to mush the moment the enormous axe slammed into the ground. The whole cave heaved and shook as a scar almost five hundred meters long cut both the mystic stone and half the forest in two. Frantic winds full of extremely sharp force ripped the remaining flora to shreds.

One cultivator actually possessed an earth-escape skill, and had sunk into the ground to avoid most of the skill. Unfortunately for him, this was [**Arcadia’s Judgment**], and the axe swing was just the first half.

The whole cave floor shuddered before a tremendous shockwave spread out, followed by the whole cave breaking apart. Another stream of energy entered Zac’s body a moment later, but he still rushed forward with finality in his eyes as a fractal forest sprang up to replace the destroyed one.

He disappeared as the ground beneath his feet cracked, and reappeared in an empty spot a hundred meters away. [**Verun's Bite**] already radiated a sanguine luster that lit up half the cave, and the air howled as the edge cut through the air. It looked like he was aiming at nothing, but space suddenly flickered as a wretched-looking man appeared.

The final Havarok warrior had lost both an arm and a leg, and it looked like he would topple from a gust of wind. His aura was erratic, but he still managed to generate an undulating ball of chaotic power in his remaining hand as an intricate talisman appeared above his head. The rampant energies didn't even faze Zac, and he only slightly angled his torso as he continued his swing. He felt a sixth and final surge of energy while a chunk of his torso was blasted to smithereens.

The pain was blinding, and Zac fell over with a groan. His defensive skill was no match for the final blast of a dying warrior. At least he got the last of them in one go. There would be no one to spread the news of what happened here. There was no time to rest, as the shakes from his finisher didn't stop. In fact, they grew more intense as the seconds passed.

"It's the Living Pulse!" Catheya screamed with dismay. "It's being rerouted!"

"Uh," Zac grunted and spat out a mouthful of blood as he saw one geyser after another sprout up from the cracks he'd caused. "Well, find a way out of here."

"What the hell! Do I look like a Geomancer to you?" she huffed as Zac looted the corpse next to him with shaky hands, but she still conjured a series of ice crystals and closed her eyes.

Zac guessed she was using some sort of scouting ability. He was focused on something else: booty. He'd been forced to burn his whole [**Force of the Void**] reserves to take these guys out before they had a chance to react, and he still had another hole blasted in his body. He needed some sort of compensation for his suffering.

The largest scar in the ground was fast filling up with water, and the cave was still heaving ominously. Zac ate one of his Peak healing pills as he shuffled forward, and the chains of **[Love's Bond]** shot into the water while Zac dug through the meaty pulp on the ground until he fished out a couple of Cosmos Sacks, a few Spirit Tools and a Spatial Ring. The chains rose out of the water a moment later, dragging up another corpse.

It was the cultivator who used an earth-escape skill. It was the only body that retained a semblance of its original form apart from the leader's. Both corpses were gruesome, but they might be salvageable with the help of his Origin Mark and some Corpse-lord methods. They were probably too maimed to become Revenants, but it was high time for Zac to learn the method to create the second common form of the undead.

"Hurry!" Catheya shouted as she started running in the opposite direction they'd come from. "I found the path they used. Hopefully, it leads to the surface!"

"Alright," Zac grunted as he started running to catch up. Each step felt like getting stabbed, but it was better than getting swallowed by the Living Pulse.

Zac caught up with Catheya with the help of **[Loamwalker]**, but they only managed to get a few hundred meters inside before a shocking torrent of densely life-attuned water burst through the ground, shooting rocks in all directions like a cluster bomb. They jumped into the tunnel Catheya had chosen, and she hurriedly tried to erect an ice wall to keep the deluge away.

Unsurprisingly, it only withstood the pressure for a second before the ice was completely eroded.

They kept up their frantic escape, trying to erect various roadblocks for the water. Catheya erected walls while he threw out everything from boulders to submersibles to block up the path. Still, the Living Pulse was undeniable and kept crashing through all barriers in its pursuit.

Catheya was clearly having trouble keeping up even when using some sort of frostblink ability, and Zac eventually had

[Love's Bond] pick her up, which allowed her to focus on forming barriers without having to worry about running.

Zac reached a wide chute that led straight up while also having multiple paths to choose from. He climbed up rather than continue down one of the other tunnels. Just a few seconds later, the Life Pulse blasted into the area and was diverted through the three tunnels rather than continuing upward.

They stopped at a terrace after climbing over two hundred meters, and sat down to recuperate while watching the water below. The Living Pulse was readjusting, and the cave kept shaking for over ten minutes until the situation stabilized.

“Thank you,” Catheya eventually said.

“No problem.” Zac shrugged. “Was better than being slowed down by your shuffling.”

“Not that,” Catheya said with a roll of her eyes. “For not giving me up. Would have made your life a lot easier.”

“Oh, that. It’s not like I could show them how much money I have,” Zac said with a wry smile. “Besides, I need you to guide me to the Life-Death Pearls.”

“Right,” Catheya snorted. “Still, thank you.”

“Well, no problem.” Zac smiled.

They rested up for a while longer, and Catheya focused on resetting her arm and expelling the last pollen in her body.

Zac used some of his kill energy on **[Surging Vitality]** to close the grisly wound in his side before focusing on his nodes. The remaining energy was enough to gain two levels, though that was only thanks to him already having opened the nodes in his undead form. After the energy was expended, Zac took out a Supreme-grade Nexus Crystal and continued to fill up the remaining nodes.

Even with the physical wound being fixed, it would take a while for **[Purity of the Void]** to remove the lingering Dao from the Havarok leader. He’d actually left a mark, one Zac

thankfully noticed and crushed with a continuous stream of mental energy.

It took him another ten hours to completely expel the foreign Dao, at which point Zac had also managed to activate the partially filled third node. At that point, he was level 105 in his human form, compared to level 109 as a Draugr.

Zac gave it some thought, and allocated the 30 free points into Strength, just like he had with the previous 10. Survivability was important, but the previous battle proved a strong offense was a viable type of defense.

“You fused the two big skills you used in the Base Town into one,” Catheya commented when Zac opened his eyes.

“Yeah.” Zac nodded.

There was no point in denying it. Catheya watched his battles outside the Tower of Eternity from the first row. She would have to be completely oblivious to not understand where [**Arcadia’s Judgment**] came from.

“I don’t understand how it just appeared out of nowhere though. I didn’t sense a thing until it was there,” Catheya said, her black eyes peering into Zac’s like she was trying to dig out the secrets hiding within his body. “The more I see, the less I understand. Can you sell me the method?”

“It’s impossible for you,” Zac said with a shake of his head before he started lying through his teeth. “It’s a trick on the senses.”

“So, natural endowment. A natal illusory Specialty Core perhaps? Is it related to your weird body?” Catheya asked, and held up her hands upon seeing Zac’s glare. “Alright, alright.”

Zac didn’t know if such a Specialty Core actually existed, but he was more than happy to let Catheya believe her guess to be wrong. Especially since it meant getting even further from the truth in regard to his double races.

“Still, such an ability is extremely handy if used right,” she muttered. “There has to be a drawback for balance, though.”

Zac didn't really feel there was one, but he agreed there probably should be one if not for his mother's meddling. For example, the Specialty Core called Overdrive empowered attacks almost as much as a berserking skill or a cultivation manual, but you overdrafted your body by using it. He only needed to absorb some energy to refill his reserves.

Maybe he simply didn't know the price of his action, and fate would sooner or later come to collect.

RIPPLES

A ripple spread through the web, and a small smile spread across Alvod's face. It looked like Va Tapek's little disciple really did deliver. He'd been worried since he'd felt the node condensing. Luckily, the node had been broken apart before the change was irrevocable.

Not that Catheya Sharva'Zi's role was critical to his designs. It wasn't like his path toward eternity was so fragile that it couldn't take a few mishaps. It was only one conduit out of hundreds, most of which had been in place for eons. Just, the more lines that were added, the closer to perfection his tapestry would get. The fallout of this particular node wasn't as good as the constructed route, but it was good enough.

If anything, things were going above expectation. He should have guessed. Destruction always came easier than conservation, and change was part of Heavenly Law. The real question was what the local natives had planned for the final step. They wouldn't roll over at the core of their foundation being extracted and stolen. Especially not by an outsider.

Alvod waited with anticipation. A shimmering drop appeared in front of him, dark-green in color, though it sometimes felt like it was golden or black. It hovered, its very existence impacting reality around it. Death was not death. Life was not life. It was the cyclic harmony of twilight and daybreak, the eternal evening tides.

A small bead of Primal Dao. Truth condensed into the purest form the base dimensions could take without unraveling. Something that only formed naturally in the

exalted domains—the cultivation havens someone like him would never gain access to.

The Heavens had been gated off, and the ancient factions held the keys. You would either have to pursue the broken peaks or bend the knee for a chance to drink at the fountain of truth.

Alvod wasn't willing. His path was within the purview of the Heavens, and he would never surrender his freedom.

Even his old friends thought his actions in the Havarok Empire were a matter of vengeance. They thought he fled here and entered the Twilight Ocean like a rat scurrying for safety. It couldn't be further from the truth.

Reociv Havarok had been a full-bodied bastard who deserved to die for what he'd done to Tola, but would Alvod really have risked everything if not for the item that had fallen into the princeling's possession? The item that now formed the core of the tapestry of life and death. Alvod had found half the core before coming to power back in Zecia, and spent four hundred thousand years searching for its other half.

Yet that bastard swooped in and accidentally got his hands on it just as Alvod was on the precipice of success. It was Alvod who brought that Immemorial Realm to the surface at the cost of most of his fortune. Yet that man had gotten his hands on the item without even understanding what he was dealing with.

He'd had no choice. If Reociv were allowed to bring that item back to his ancestors, they'd soon realize its true nature.

Tens of thousands of runes emerged from the tapestry, forming layer after layer of seals and protections around the bead of truth. This realm was too lowly for it to contain a bead of pure Primal Dao for long. It would get tainted in no time, reduced to its baser components.

The sealed bead was soon interred into the tapestry, causing shuddering waves to spread through the patterns. The bead joined the others in the core, and Alvod's eyes gleamed with anticipation as he saw that the beacon was three-quarters

full. His cells screamed with desire as he looked at the Primal Dao, but forced himself to look away. His chances were slim even if he managed to fill the chalice to the brim.

He needed to be patient. Just two more years.

“Hear ye, hear ye,” the ever-suffering grand marshal of the kingdom of Billy sighed, still not fully understanding the nomenclature of his new overlords. “King Billy, Lord of Bonk Mountain, has in his infinite wisdom sent out a divine decree, so listen well! The Divine Kingdom of Bonk Mountain requires more Dao Stones to be sourced for the conflict with the others! Every household will need to contribute three Dao Stones.”

The gathered Smallboys—Gnivelings as they’d been called before King Billy’s grand impartment—listened on as their large ears shook with worry.

“We’ve been fishing for stones every week for the past four months,” one of the Smallboys said, stepping forward. “We appreciate what King Billy has done to protect us in this new environment... but the stones are becoming scarce. We lost Lorom just two weeks ago.”

A few voices of agreement rippled through the crowd, causing Hanos’ brows to scrunch up. The marshal nervously glanced toward the mountain, steeling his heart as he felt a tendril poke him between the shoulder blades. Hanos somewhat liked his new master, but he liked living even more.

“What do you know!” Hanos roared. “King Billy is who keeps us safe through his communion with the holy spirit. King Billy is the one who protects us from the badlands, tirelessly swinging the holy scepter for our salvation! Do you think such a sacrifice comes cheap? Do you think King Billy’s miracles can be created out of thin air? He needs more resources! No more complaints. Set out right this instant!”

Some of the Gnivelings muttered and waved their oversized ears at the towering mountain. Most simply went to

prepare their gear for excavating the Dao Stones from the riverbeds and noxious marshes.

‘Good, just three more villages,’ a gleeful voice echoed in his mind.

‘What about King Billy? What if he finds out?’ Hanos cried in his mind. ‘I don’t want to be bonked.’

‘I’ll deal with that. Besides, the great king has other things to worry about.’

Two weeks of fervent collection, but it was finally time. Ogras looked at the pile of Dao Stones with anticipation shimmering in his eyes. Over two years of arduous cultivation and one year of planning. He was finally ready to leave that insufferable giant’s shadow.

Who would have expected a netherblasted Dimensional Seed to gain sapience? And who would have expected it to form such an intimate connection with that brute when there were far more dashing candidates so close by? Was it because Billy had saved these big-eared bastards while Ogras secured the treasures of the newly incorporated realm? Was it simply because simpletons flocked together?

Things hadn’t been too bad in the beginning. Those Th’Zaroth Hivebeasts weren’t joking around, providing ample opportunities to hone one’s combat skills. With the air teeming with the Dao, each day was a revelation. Be it skills, Daos, or even levels, everything came smoothly in this place. Even evolving skills was accomplished as naturally as breathing being in a constant state of inspiration.

Two months of slaughter, and the two of them had finally managed to kill the Hive queen and seize the enormous meteor that contained her hive. It’d not only provided them with a Nexus Node, but also a large amount of food—the warrior ants were actually quite delicious.

Only, from there, things started to go awry.

Turned out that Earth's Nexus Nodes weren't the only ones Ogras was locked out of. He was even unable to become the master of a desolate rock in a Hidden Realm. He was forced to once more don the mantle of the helpful advisor, steering Billy in the right direction. He just couldn't understand why such a simple mind was so hard to control.

If anything, his experiences over the past three years ingrained in him a deep respect for that bespectacled human who usually stayed by Billy's side. Nigel was his name? How did he manage to get anything done with this bastard holding the reins?

Time to change his approach. He'd tried so hard to get the brute to do the heavy lifting, but he was adamant about holding the fort rather than sending the troops to the depths of this ever-growing realm. And if Ogras couldn't get others to pave the way, he would simply have to do the job himself. He could feel it. It was beckoning to him from deep in the darkness. Something related to his path.

Something with the ability to reforge his fate.

Besides, it was now or never. The pocket realm they lived inside was stabilizing. For over two years it had frantically moved about and swallowed one realm after another, but the sky seldom changed color any longer. The Dimensional Seed was bound to find a spot it liked and settle down.

And when that happened, it was just a matter of time before this place was discovered. Before an entrance was drilled open and greedy bastards came swarming in. All these Hidden Realms collected, each most likely never touched by other men. Each full of unique treasures and opportunities.

He needed to snatch them all before the outsiders arrived.

“Behind you!” Bubbur roared.

Galau whirled around, his large two-handed sword drawing a ruthless arc.

A desiccated head jumped out of the pirate's sleeve to bite down on the edge, only to shriek and crumble when the corrosive acid smeared on the blade touched its mouth. It instinctively released its bite, allowing Galau to finish the swing and cut both the guardian head and the pirate apart.

Galau sighed and looked around, relieved to see things were finally calming down across the hidden base. These situations could spiral out of control at a moment's notice. Normally, that would have been a problem for the soldiers rather than support staff like himself, but all hands were fighting hands in the Muscle Brigade, even his own.

A burning meteor suddenly slammed into the protective dome in the sky, and Galau hurriedly shot out a hook from his belt before he was dragged out into the Void again. He wasn't really fazed about the environmental array being broken, since something like this happened weekly.

And the source of the chaos was often the same.

"Boss, watch out!" a man screamed. "You'll break the base before we've looted it."

"Sorry, sorry!" a rough voice laughed as Greatest Peak flew through the new entrance he'd created. "This captain was pretty strong. I got a bit excited."

Galau grimaced at the burning crater. The pirate captain's gear was definitely unsalvageable at this point. Again.

"Money brat! Stop moping around and get to counting," Bubbur said as he threw over two Cosmos Sacks.

"It's Quartermaster Gubao," Galau said, and took out his inspection table before he started scanning the contents of the sacks.

Most items were categorized in the back of his mind, while a few were taken out to be properly scanned.

"You mean Shartermaster?" another brigadier who came to turn in the haul sniggered, prompting a few roars of laughter.

"That was almost two years ago! And I was out of my mind on that hexbrew we'd found the day before!" Galau said

with gritted teeth before he shot a baleful glare at the laughing pirate hunters. “Go on, keep laughing. We’ll see who gets their salary paid with Nexus Coins and Spatial Fragments, and who gets paid in unsellable scrap.”

“I’ll call you whatever you want the moment you can beat me,” Bubbur laughed. “Now hurry up. Boss has that glint in his eyes.”

Galau groaned, speeding up his pilfering of the Cosmos Sacks one by one in search of hidden markers. It was a common practice of these space brigands. They’d leave a concealed treasure or two among their hoarded loot in case it was stolen. That way they could always find the loot again.

Others would turn into beacons warning anyone in the vicinity, making it impossible to sneak up on unsuspecting targets. While he was making fast progress, he got a sinking feeling as he saw Greatest walk over with the fires of war burning in his eyes.

“Wait, boss!” Galau entreated. “Just a few more minutes!”

“You know the rules,” Greatest said, his fist ripping through the air with enough force to bend space itself.

Galau inwardly cried as he scrambled away, and could only look on with despair as one Cosmos Sack after another was swallowed by the void caused by the swing. The most effective method to make sure you weren’t being tracked was to destroy everything.

This Heaven-cursed family.

Why did the pirate captain have to possess that taboo technology, which resulted in an epic clash between the boss and a machine swarm outside the meteor? The madness of the fight had already claimed Greatest Peak, and anything that delayed him fighting another worthy adversary would be destroyed, even if it was a mountain of wealth.

“Let’s go, Shartermaster,” Bubbur said with a wry smile. “There’s still the young boss. If we hurry, you might be able to find some good things.”

Galau’s eyes lit up, and he jumped onto Bubbur’s Raider.

The Raiders, small four-meter vessels that almost looked like umbrellas, were something they'd looted two years ago. It'd been one of the tougher fights of the Muscle Brigade, but the spoils helped them adapt to this chaotic place tremendously.

They only housed five people, could barely turn, and held no weaponry. But two very desirable features made them a fan favorite among the brigadiers. First, they were extremely quick, cutting through the chaotic spatial waves like butter. Second, the front of the vessel, the umbrella, was both an extremely sturdy shield and an efficient Array Breaker.

Now, every time the Muscle Brigade found a target to interrogate—well, rob—over a hundred Raiders shot out of the mothership like small meteors, each one manned by five bloodthirsty meatheads. Those who owned Raiders almost always reached the criminals—er, prey—faster than the others.

Galau shook his head as Bubbur escorted him to the satellite base that Average was in charge of taking down. It was an intelligence post, though Galau didn't hold much hope they'd find what they were looking for this time either.

They'd arrived in the central region of the Million Gates Territory over three years ago, and eventually managed to confirm that a Space Gate really was forming somewhere. However, the Million Gates Territory was just too vast. More to the point, space was too chaotic, making any attempt at navigation nigh impossible.

Even after searching for two full years, they hadn't come any closer to figuring out where it was. For all they knew, it might have already stabilized, and an endless army was gathering at their doorstep without the Zecia Sector knowing. Hopefully, that wasn't the case.

It appeared like the invaders didn't have it too easy. The odd spatial ripples that were the source of the disaster were ongoing, only affecting the Million Gates Territory these days. Forming a Space Gate between sectors through such turbulence should be impossible. At least prohibitively

expensive for frontier forces, according to the boss. They were most likely waiting for things to settle down.

Blood and a few corpses littered the halls as Bubbur crashed his Raider through the closest wall of the satellite base. It looked like most of the defenses were the mechanized troops sold by the heretics hiding at the outer rim of the Million Gates Territory.

The cultivator in Galau despised these things, while the businessman in him almost salivated at the prospective earnings these taboo tools represented. He'd seen just how much money these items could bring in while visiting one of the leviathans to trade and stock up on items. Unfortunately, they were all slated for destruction now that the Muscle Brigade had its hands on them.

Galau found Average in the command room, and the young man nodded at Galau as he pointed at a small pile of Spatial Treasures. Three years of fighting pirates had completely reformed the youth, turning him into a capable warrior brimming with killing intent. However, the years in the heart of the Million Gates Territory left their mark on Average, and he looked more like a pirate than pirate hunter by this point.

Then again, that could be said about himself. Galau shook his head as he looked down at his scarred hands.

“Anything interesting?” Galau asked as he started scanning the Spatial Rings.

“I found it. I finally found it.”

RELEGATION

There was no telling if there were hidden downsides to his unique ability, but so far the only one seemed to be how hard it was to upgrade his bloodline. Zac still held on to the **[Cardinal Kernel]** because of the events on the Memorysteel mountain. He wanted to upgrade his bloodline to E-grade, but the moment probably needed to be right.

First of all, some random patch of seabed or cultivation cave wouldn't do. Just the awakening had eaten half the treasures in the mountain. There was no telling what the second awakening would require. He didn't want to waste the kernel by activating the process, only to find there wasn't enough fuel to power the whole evolution. Secondly, he needed to find a safe place since he'd been knocked clean out the last time.

What if cultivators cropped up because of the chaos and decided to get some easy contribution points?

"I can't and don't want to go into detail on this ability," Zac said to Catheya. "This mental trick is part of the agreement, so keep it to yourself, alright?"

If possible, he would have preferred using his Annihilation Sphere to take those people out rather than using **[Force of the Void]**. That way, Catheya's memories would be erased as well. Unfortunately, he had no way to use the skill as an area attack capable of targeting all six cultivators. He might have been able to take out the leader, leaving the others to escape or retaliate.

Perhaps the leader would have managed to avoid the strike like he almost avoided [**Arcadia's Judgment**], at which point Zac would have been screwed, having lost the element of surprise.

"I know, I'm not an ingrate," Catheya said, giving him an accusatory stare. "You know, it's a bit depressing to travel with you. At first, I thought we were roughly at the same level, but now I'm finding you weren't even exerting yourself before. How are people like me even supposed to get a shot when there are monsters like you walking around?"

"There is ultimately balance in the universe," Zac snorted. "Things are not as simple as they look."

"I know." Catheya nodded. "Heavy is the crown. I think it's the same with my ancestor. She should have the qualifications to become a real tycoon back home, but she's maintaining her distance as her clan falls apart. Who knows what kind of troubles she's encountered on her road to power."

"Falling apart?" Zac asked with a frown. "Is your clan in trouble?"

"Not trouble like extinction, but trouble nonetheless." Catheya sighed. "We're facing relegation."

"What? Relegation?" Zac asked, confused.

"I once told you that conflict within the empire is disallowed, but that doesn't mean there isn't competition. Strength is ultimately the most important thing. Our clan has been in a steady decline for a long time, and we're risking being downgraded from a Middle-tier clan to an Entry-level clan," Catheya said. "We'll lose large parts of our domains, which means even fewer cultivation resources. It'll probably exacerbate the decline even further."

"And that's why you wanted me to send a message to Be'Zi," Zac surmised.

"Exactly. I wanted you to tell her that Re'Zar Sharva'Zi is approaching his end. His chances at forming another step are bleak, according to my father. He will leave on his final journey in fifty generations or so, and there is currently no one

to take his place. We've managed to keep the news sealed for now, but it's just a matter of time."

"Who's Re'Zar?" Zac asked.

"Ancestor's lineal great-grandson," Catheya said. "And our only Autarch."

"What're these steps you talked about?" Zac asked. "Is it related to the B-grade?"

"Yes. Gaining Autarchy is to form a ladder to Heaven, and the more steps you form, the greater the foundation you build for this ladder. Each step adds not only power, but a large amount of longevity. Our ancestor is a One-Step Autarch, the lowest level. He's already used too many longevity medicines, and a breakthrough is his only chance now."

Zac slowly nodded in understanding. It looked like having an Autarch, even if one at the lowest rung, was enough to be considered a Middle-tier clan in the Heartlands. That probably meant a Low-tier clan had Divine Monarchs and powerful accumulations, and forces beneath that weren't even considered proper clans.

Which likely also meant a Peak-stage clan in the Undead Empire might not even have A-grade cultivators, going by the grading of Clan Sharva'Zi, or at least not too many of them.

"Ancestor Be'Zi was an above-average Two-Step Autarch when she left," Catheya added. "For her to still be alive... she has to have reached the later stages of Autarchy, perhaps even higher. If she returns, we'd not only avoid relegation, we'd instantly be promoted."

No wonder Catheya was so eager to find her ancestor. It was really a matter of heaven or hell for her clan whether she returned. A clan falling from grace always led to a feeding frenzy. Zac doubted the commandments could completely protect against something like that. It was essentially Heavenly Law.

"So, steps are a bit like Cosmic Cores? A bottleneck?" Zac asked.

“I can feel that I’m not allowed to discuss it,” Catheya said. “Autarchs are the main power of any empire since those above rarely make a move. Knowledge is controlled.”

“Well, keep your secrets, then,” Zac smiled.

“Like I have a choice,” Catheya said with a roll of her eyes. “I can tell you that everyone who reaches that stage has once been Heaven’s Chosen or something even greater, yet less than 1% ever go beyond three steps. You could say that cultivators at that height live in defiance of the Heavens, even when walking Heaven’s Path. Every step is met with resistance.”

“Well, I guess that’s far off from us.” Zac shrugged as he thought things over.

Catheya’s request was pretty simple. Convey a short update on the situation of Clan Sharva’Zi. But Zac wasn’t sure if he could. He might be sent back to the underground cave and Be’Zi if he found the second Splinter of Oblivion. Which might very well have been a one-off thing the System arranged for him.

“I might be able to relay your message. The question is, what can you provide in return?” Zac said after a while.

“I’ll hold nothing back when teaching you all the insights and corpse-raising methods my master has imparted,” Catheya said. “You can even keep the information crystals.”

“That’s part of the previous deal,” Zac said. “Do you have any other information from your clan that can be useful for me?”

“To be clear, I can only teach you things my master has imparted to me. I can’t divulge any of Clan Sharva’Zi’s methods, same as with any descendant you meet,” Catheya said.

“Your master isn’t part of the clan?” Zac asked with interest.

“Only partly,” Catheya said with a shake of her head. “Master Va Tapek is an old friend of the third Supreme Elder of Clan Sharva’Zi. He joined us as an exterior elder, but he’s

not very restrained. I've gained most of my methods from him rather than the clan, and he never restricted me from teaching others."

It really looked like Clan Sharva'Zi was in decline. Catheya's master wasn't even a Divine Monarch, yet the clan couldn't demand much of anything, from the sounds of it. Also, there was still one question that puzzled Zac quite a bit.

"Why you?" Zac asked. "Why would a high-tier Monarch take you under his wing and take you all over the frontier? They don't usually do that, right?"

"You should have already seen it. We're both Ice Warriors," Catheya explained before she deflated a bit. "Also... I happen to be the descendant of the third Supreme Elder. His youngest daughter, in fact."

"Basically, your master is kind of doing his buddy a favor by taking you on?" Zac guessed, getting a glare in return.

"I might not be some dual-race indestructible weirdo, but I have my strong points. My Ice affinities are among the top three in my generation in the clan. I have at least five hidden nodes, and I natively opened one of them," Catheya said with a haughty demeanor. "And a powerful father is a talent as well. Proves I have strong genes."

"Natively what?" Zac asked, ignoring the latter part. "You've mentioned that word before."

"How do you know so little when you obviously have such powerful backing?" Catheya muttered with exasperation. "It means I opened one of my hidden nodes upon birth. I could use some of its effects while in F-grade, when it was completely unlocked the moment I evolved."

"Something like that's possible?" Zac exclaimed. "Which one did you open?"

Zac hoped to gain some insight into the hidden nodes of the Draugr, in case there were still some lurking in his body. His three hidden nodes were all connected to his Void Emperor bloodline and seemed to form a closed system. That didn't mean there weren't more of them to open.

“I guess it’s fair you know some after what you’ve displayed to save me,” Catheya said after some hesitation. “It’s a special hidden node related to my nose.”

“Your nose?” Zac repeated with a blank look.

“It’s very sharp,” Catheya added.

“A very sharp nose,” Zac sagely nodded. “Impressive.”

“It’s a natural scouting ability that can help me with everything from finding treasures to spotting hidden enemies. It allowed me to sense your Draugr heritage back in the Base Town! Well, whatever. A brute like you wouldn’t understand a good thing if it hit you in the face,” she huffed.

“I can try sending a message, but your master’s scattered methods aren’t enough considering they’re part of our earlier agreement. I want a top-grade treasure as well,” Zac said. “One equivalent to the things the top one thousand combatants could get from the Fate-Plucking trial.”

“If I had anything like that, I would have already used it on myself,” Catheya said with exasperation.

“There are still almost three years to go in this place, right?” Zac smiled. “Between killing off people and exploring the depths, you should get your hands on one. If you hand one over to me before the trial ends, then I’ll try to send a message when I return.”

“Why must I find it myself?” Catheya frowned. “Do you think you can just pick those things up off the ground? Only a handful are excavated every Ascent, and seldom by people like me. My master can get one in short order after we leave.”

“No deal,” Zac said with a shake of his head. “This is nonnegotiable. Luckily for you, this is a double trial. Your odds are a lot better than normal.”

Things had already progressed to this point. There was no way he’d stay a second longer than needed in Twilight Harbor. Between Catheya discovering his true form and Alea wanting to eat the Twilight Fruits, he’d pretty much given up on the Fate-Plucking Ladder unless something changed.

It was better to leave the trial a few months early and slink away before anything could happen. After that, he'd have around ninety years to sound out whether Catheya had betrayed his secrets and what the Undead Empire's response would be.

"I'll try, but you have to understand that you're asking the impossible from me," Catheya entreated. "Please, this is a matter of life and death for my clan. Isn't there anything else I can do for you? On the outside or in here?"

Hearing the last part gave Zac another idea.

"There is, *one*, other thing," he said. "I'm looking for two particular spots in this trial, and they should be around the middle reaches. Find the exact locations of those two places, and I'll try to convey the message."

"That's it?" Catheya asked skeptically. "Just the locations of the two spots?"

"That's it," Zac said. "Deal?"

"Absolutely." Catheya quickly nodded. "Do you have a description?"

Zac described the locations of the two Remnants as best he could remember from the vision back in the Mystic Realm, along with the hints he'd gathered so far. He figured he could have Catheya find those places while he checked out the chasm and got rid of the brand this Va Tapek left in his body.

"Never heard of those two places, and they're not in the private missives of my clan. But I should definitely be able to find them within the year," Catheya said. "What's special about them?"

"Don't enter those places," Zac said. "Only trouble waits in there."

"No wonder you're looking for them, then," Catheya laughed. "Trouble seems to follow you wherever you go. Do you know that your home sector is currently in isolation because of you? We barely got out."

"What? What did I do?" Zac asked with confusion.

“Because of the thing you summoned in the Tower of Eternity,” Catheya said. “Apparently, that stele is some weird artifact older than the System itself. Wherever it appears, conflict will follow. The higher-ups are afraid just its apparition will spread chaos across the frontier, so Zecia has been quarantined. No ships in or out. Of course, it’s impossible to keep completely sealed, especially when the Heavens thrive on conflict.”

“No wonder.” Zac sighed, remembering how that huge Ogre at the Big Axe Coliseum mentioned war was coming.

Was it all his fault? He shook his head. It couldn’t be. He was just a small fry who could barely impact the fate of a single planet. If anything, it was on the System. It was the System that conjured the apparition, not he. And since the System wanted a conflict in Zecia, it would accomplish it one way or another.

That alone was barely a comfort as he thought of the chaos and loss of life that a sector-wide war would bring. Unfortunately, he was just a nobody. He wouldn’t be able to impact the situation as he was. He could only push himself to get stronger. Once he reached the top, he’d be able to prevent things like this from getting out of control.

They sat in silence and continued to recuperate and cultivate for a few more hours, but eventually, it was time to go. They’d completed their task as best they could, and Catheya still hadn’t sensed any of her followers coming down to look for her. She was anxious to get back to the surface, and Zac was eager to get the Life-Death Pearls.

They picked the tunnel at the top of the chute they’d rested in and followed whatever path had the least ambient life-attunement energies. Their efforts paid off over the next hours, and they kept ascending until the energy was barely marked by the Living Pulse.

“We should be closing in on the surface by now,” Catheya said.

“Alright. Give me a second,” Zac said, making Catheya look over with confusion.

Zac jogged to a secluded section out of Catheya's sight and erected an illusion array around himself before he closed his eyes, letting waves of Cosmic Energy spread through his body. He kept this going for over a minute until he activated his Duplicity Core. A wave of Miasma spread through his body, and he was back in his Arcaz personality a few seconds later. It was the best he could do to obfuscate the exact details of his transformation.

"So weird. Is the Twilight Energy even affecting you at all?" Catheya said with a shake of her head when Zac returned. He only smiled in response as he passed her by on the way to the exit.

They were almost at the crest, and both readied themselves for battle. Just in case. The water above was mostly neutral in flavor, but was still a stretch that passed right above the Living Pulse. There would definitely be numerous cultivators passing. Two Draugr would definitely stick out if discovered, and they were pretty lucky they hadn't run into a single group since taking out the Havarok squad.

Truthfully, his actions beneath the surface might have worked in their favor in unexpected ways. The upheavals he caused might have been felt all the way to the surface, and who'd dare venture into some tunnels that could come crashing down on you at a moment's notice? The last stretch was too narrow to pass through, but they were so far from the Living Pulse by this point, Zac simply cut it apart, creating a tunnel.

"Two signals!" Catheya exclaimed with glee the moment they emerged from the underground. "It should be Varo and Qirai!"

RADIANT TEMPLE

Two signals were better than nothing. It also meant yet another one of their squad was down for the count. Only a month had passed, yet they were approaching the average 50% casualty rate for the Twilight Ascent. This trial was bound to be a bloody chapter in the history of Twilight Harbor.

“Where are the signals from?” Zac asked as he scanned the surroundings for enemies.

“Half a day away, toward where the Living Pulse will emerge,” Catheya said as she started to move in that direction. “They must have figured I’d appear somewhere close to the outlet.”

Zac followed suit, and they started to make their way through the dense underbrush of the ocean. Luckily, the area was full of seaweed growing over two meters wide and fifty meters tall, providing them with ample cover, as long as they hid their energy signatures. That, along with Catheya’s node-empowered nose, meant they didn’t encounter any trouble until they reached the spot.

It was a nondescript part of a ridge that ran along the direction of the Living Pulse, with neither any entrances nor cracks to show for it. Catheya was still sure it was the right spot. She knocked with a specific pattern on the stone. A door appeared a few seconds later, and Qirai peered outside.

“It’s good that you’re fine,” Qirai said with relief before she shot a glare at Zac. “You’re still around?”

“Still around.” Zac smiled as he looked the Titan up and down. “You look worse for wear.”

It was true. The Titan looked like she'd been through a few tribulations to match Zac's own. Qirai sported a nasty burn on her left cheek that stretched beneath her clothes all the way to her left hand. Her aura was also a bit unstable. Zac guessed her soul was slightly wounded.

“Are you alright? What's going on?” Catheya asked with worry. “And where's Varo?”

“Varo's inside, sealed,” Qirai sighed. “He's hurt pretty bad.”

“Who did it? Sharpo?” Catheya asked as they stepped inside the hideout, a hint of killing intent leaking from her body.

“No. She's either dead or escaped,” Qirai said with a shake of her head, sealing the door behind them. “You think she was the traitor?”

“Probably not. We got dragged beneath the surface,” Catheya said. “We met Yod there. If not for Mr. Black here, I would be dead.”

“Oh?” Qirai exclaimed with surprise, her previously hostile gaze making a drastic turn. “Thank you.”

“Nothing to it. I got caught in his trap as well, after all,” Zac said with a smile.

“Take me to Varo,” Catheya urged. “I'll see what I can do.”

There were just two rooms in the dugout, with Varo being in the inner one. He was lying in a coffin that reminded Zac of the one he'd gotten for Alea. His state was in even worse shape than expected, with extensive burns covering his body. His left arm was essentially a scorched twig. Zac wasn't sure that was something that could be restored with healing pills, no matter how good they were.

Not only that, there was a blistering heat coming from within Varo's body, no doubt from some fire-aspected Dao

hidden inside the assassin's body. Zac figured the two must have met an incredibly powerful fire-based cultivator, considering he could cause such extensive damage even inside an ocean that should weaken his or her attacks.

"Who did this?" Catheya asked again, the room temperature decreasing by a noticeable margin.

"After the ship broke apart, we found ourselves next to the Living Pulse without a ship." Qirai sighed. "Sharpo wanted to split up, but how could we let her just slink away? She might have been the traitor. We caught her and started making our way here. We figured you'd appear around these parts one way or another as long as you survived getting dragged away by the stream.

"But this section is controlled by the living, and no one who's made it this far is a weakling," Qirai continued with a grimace. "We got ambushed by a trio from the Kalvan Clan. Managed to kill one and chase the other two away. We weren't as lucky when we ran into a group from the Radiant Temple."

"The Radiant Temple? Not one of their subsidiaries?" Catheya exclaimed with surprise. "How?"

Zac knew what she wanted to ask. The Radiant Empire was different than the Undead Empire in that it was a relatively small force. Certainly, they had billions and billions of members, but that was nothing compared to the endless citizens of the Undead Empire or even the Havarok Empire.

The Radiant Temple ruled over tens of thousands of subsidiary clans, empires, and sects over having direct control. They set up offices called Temples of Radiance in the subsidiary sectors, though it was more apt to call them tax collection agencies. Altogether, they controlled an area over fifty times the size of the Zecia Sector. Those who were actually part of the Temple were vanishingly small in number compared to the actual number of cultivators within their domain.

The Radiant Temple used those subsidiary sectors for two things: generating resources through taxes and treasure collection, and to scout for talents. Most peak talents of the

subsidiary factions were absorbed into the Temple, while the elders received a hefty reward. That way they maintained control while procuring talented seedlings sent to them from left and right.

That also meant the true members of the Radiant Temple were the best of the best in not only a B-grade empire, but also dozens of subsidiary sectors. The Havarok squad they met could have been anything from some lowly clan to soldiers in the Havarok Army, but members of the Radiant Temple were all the real deal.

How were Qirai and Varo still alive if these kinds of people came for them?

“It was luckily just a scouting party of three members, two of whom were employed locals,” Qirai said. “It was the real member who unleashed an attack that destroyed everything when we needed to flee. It was like a supernova that went off. I managed to block out most of it, but I think Sharpo got swallowed entirely. Varo faired as... you can see.”

Catheya nodded heavily, taking out a stopper and pouring its contents over Varo’s body, causing it to sizzle. After that, she placed an ice-blue gem on his chest, and the fiery energy coming from his body was quickly suppressed.

“He’ll heal, but he’ll be out for a while. Even then, he might have to make a transition.” Catheya sighed before she turned to Zac. “Do you have any means to help?”

The transition Catheya mentioned was either to shed his mortal coil to become a specter or become a Corpse-lord. Both came with demerits. Few cultivator’s classes’ skill sets were meant to be used as ghosts, and you’d lose a chunk of your power. Reaching Hegemony would also become a lot harder.

And adding outsiders’ body parts to your own unavoidably created issues with affinities and rejection.

“I have some good pills I bought from the Karabas Pill House, but that’s about it. My only healing skill is the one I got at your place,” Zac said with a shake of his head.

Truthfully, Zac believed it might be possible to use his Origin Mark to fix Varo's arm. The Revenant was in a coma, and his will shouldn't impact the process of creation unless he woke up. It was just... he'd already exposed two of his major secrets in only a few days, and he definitely wouldn't expose the third just to speed up Varo's recuperation.

Also, the Creation Energy was his personal ace that could both save his life or destroy an enemy.

"Alright," Catheya sighed as she turned to Qirai. "We can't stay here, especially not after the chaos we caused beneath the surface. More and more of the living will appear over the coming days, passing through toward the depths."

"What's next?" Zac asked.

"We've lost three members of our party, and one is taken out of commission. The casualty rate is over 50%, allowing me to cancel the operation. There's one more node we should have visited, but we'll skip it. If anything, we've already performed above expectation. We completed more than half of our assigned task," Catheya said.

"So, the pearls?" Zac said as a smile spread across his face.

"Right, greedy fellow," Catheya smiled with a shake of her head. "The pearls. Do you have any spare vessels we can use?"

Soon enough the group set out on the vessel Zac found in the Spatial Ring of the leader of the Havarok group. It was made from a large spiraled shell, and could be powered by anyone as long as it was fueled by Nexus Crystals. Varo had saved the purification array when the vessel sank, and Zac was once more put in the awkward situation where his soul tempering was put on hold.

There wasn't much to do about the situation, as they'd entered the middle reaches of the ocean.

The Twilight Energy had already gone from an uncomfortable annoyance to real suppression for Catheya and Qirai, and both needed a proper environment to focus on recuperation. It wasn't the end of the world, as it looked like

Zac would ultimately save two weeks by skipping the final target of the side mission.

Now they were shooting straight toward the Life-Death Pearls with Qirai at the wheel while Catheya and Zac used the purification array for eight hours each in turn. Qirai would use it for four hours, after which they let it be turned off for the final four. The past weeks had been pretty boring while maintaining the array, but this time Zac was immersed in swallowing up all the knowledge Catheya had to offer.

First, they covered the basic knowledge of fractals and how they related to skills and arrays. A lot of what Catheya knew about the subject leaned toward Miasma and Ice, but the rules were generally applicable. The most important was the large number of solutions, methods, and practical examples of upgrading skill fractals.

Upgrading skills was actually a pretty straightforward subject if you wanted the same skill but stronger. The process was sort of a mini-test by the System, where you had to prove at least a basic understanding of the runes to succeed. It was essentially the same thing as redrawing pathways, where you had to figure out the new pattern yourself based on your knowledge and the general rules that the Apostate of Order had set up.

Of course, if you diligently followed a heritage, your predecessors had already performed the heavy lifting for you. Everyone needed to make some personal modifications though. Pathways were like a thumbprint, each one unique and based on one's body. If you completely followed the patterns of others, you were bound to end up with a skill that only partially matched your pathways.

Furthermore, the greater your understanding of the Dao and your skills were, the more you could do with the upgrade.

Skill fractals were somewhat rigid in most cases, where you couldn't just redraw them as you wanted like you could with pathways. If you cut off a skill fractal from your path network, you could temporarily extract it from your body, at

which point the fractal would turn malleable for a limited duration.

That way, you could perform the changes needed to take the skill from F-grade to E-grade. The arrays Zac had purchased back in Twilight Harbor helped with this exact process, both providing suggestions and prolonging the duration that the skill fractal could stay out of the body without taking too much damage.

A skilled hand could use that window of time to also make changes so the skill better fit your needs and pathways. You could walk away with a skill that was not only a grade higher, but of higher quality and one better suited to your path. Conversely, if you lacked proficiency and understanding, you could mess up so much that the skill was degraded to a lower-quality skill.

Possibly even destroying the skill fractal altogether.

Seeing as more than half of Zac's skills were already Peak quality thanks to getting an Epic class at F-grade, there was pretty much only one way to go: down. The most important thing for him was to gain an understanding of the process and acquire enough proficiency to the point he could evolve them without going from Peak to High-quality.

Zac had already read through a lot of materials on the subject, but it was still eye-opening to get access to the knowledge of a High-grade Monarch. A lot of the information he'd gathered was broad and only scratched the surface. Catheya had given him a set of crystals that covered tens of thousands of different patterns and how to properly upgrade them without losing efficacy.

After just three weeks, Zac had already managed to form preliminary schematics for most of his skills, barring the more complex skill fractals between his two classes. There were no guarantees, yet he felt ready to start putting theory into practice as soon as he upgraded his Daos and gained some better understanding.

Next was the general knowledge of necromancy. Zac already knew some parts, but learned a lot over the following

two weeks. For example, Zac assumed that all turned cultivators restarted at level 1, but that wasn't actually the case. Revenants naturally lost around one grade upon being turned, and that could be reduced by quickly "locking" some of the energy inside the body after killing them.

Conversely, you could make the bodies lose even more if you wanted to retrain the follower from the ground up. For example, getting the level-kill titles was a lot easier for low-leveled cultivators. The easiest way to do this was to place drainage arrays on the corpse that worked a lot like the one that almost killed Catheya before. Unfortunately, progress on this front wasn't quite as smooth as it was for his skill upgrades.

"I know I called you a meathead, but this is ridiculous!" Catheya said one day as she looked at Zac's "array," which was more a series of squiggly lines. "How are you this bad at energy control? You're a pureblood!"

"You know my situation," Zac sighed as he shook the **[Stone of Hope]** in front of Catheya.

"Oh, right," Catheya said as she thought things over. "Well, I guess you technically don't need to make these arrays yourself. But you would be reliant on an Array Master to properly perform the arts. If you get to that point, you might as well hand over the whole process to a subordinate, you know?"

"Yeah, I guess... Let's go back to the skill fractals."

The lessons kept going for another week, at which point Zac felt the vessel slow down. A minute later, Qirai entered the study he and Catheya used.

"We're almost there. I think we should go the final bit on foot," the Titan said.

"How is Varo?" Catheya asked.

"Still unconscious," Qirai said with a grimace.

"Alright," Catheya said, looking a bit downcast before she turned to Zac. "You can't carry him in that coffin of yours, right?"

“Not if you want him to ever come out again,” Zac wryly smiled.

“Well, we can’t leave him here. Qirai, you’ll fashion the casket into a backpack like Mr. Black’s. Make it so that it’s quickly detachable in case of battle,” Catheya said. “We’ll bring him with us that way. Harvesting the pearls will take a week or two. Hopefully, he’ll wake up in time.”

HOLLOWTONGUE MOUNTAINS

“This is the place?” Zac asked as he dragged his axe out of the head of a corpse.

They were currently at a depth of over three thousand meters, gazing at a submerged mountain range. It reminded Zac a bit of Earth, in the sense that it looked like this particular mountain had been dropped in the middle of nowhere through randomization. The seabed he stood on was made from the same golden-green sand as the rest of the Twilight Ocean, whereas the mountain was wrought from a completely different material.

It was neither the white or gold often synonymous with life, and neither did it have the murky hues of death. It was a deep blue, and Zac didn't feel like the area leaned toward either life or death. Yet it was undeniable that the energy in the area was the strongest they'd encountered, like there was a Nexus Vein hiding beneath the mountain.

This could be both a good and a bad thing. Good in the sense it probably meant there were a lot of valuable things growing in this place, a chance to pocket some valuables. Bad in the sense that the mountain was huge, and missing it was pretty hard. They'd already spotted three parties in short order, one of which that tried to take them out only to find themselves outmatched.

It wasn't really thanks to Catheya or Qirai, though they'd fought valiantly. It was he who singlehandedly took out more than half of the other group in a furious offense. Even in these

conditions, he was completely fine, though he started to suspect his cheat-like advantage had a best-before date.

His death-attuned ocean was fast filling up with the truths hidden in the Twilight Energy. In three months or so it'd reach saturation, perhaps even sooner if he kept going farther toward the heart of the Twilight Ocean.

There was still the life-attuned half of his mind that had barely gained any improvements, but it was obvious he would reach a limit long before the trial was over. Unless he stayed a Draugr the whole time. But for now, the situation gave him a huge advantage against the other competitors in the Mystic Realm.

Elites who would normally put up a tough fight got steamrolled, as they could barely exhibit half their strength.

“What’s the matter with you?” Catheya said as she looked down at the corpses strewn around Zac, though Qirai appeared a lot more appreciative.

The Titan nodded with respect toward Zac as she handed her mistress the corpse of the cultivator she took out. Her demeanor in general had taken a complete turn since he and Catheya had returned from the underworld. Catheya had briefly gone over the events, though they'd obviously been severely modified to protect his hidden identity.

Still, the fact Zac had not only saved Qirai’s master a few times, but also singlehandedly taken out a powerful squad in an adverse situation, was all she needed to open up. They hadn’t spoken much on the way here, considering Zac had been busy with his studies, and Qirai with steering the vessel and keeping a lookout for enemies, but she’d often come by offering liquor during their free time.

“Almost two months I’ve spent teaching you the basics of internment and necromancy. What’s the first rule?” Catheya continued as she stowed Qirai’s and her own corpse.

“Don’t destroy the heads,” Zac said with a roll of his eyes. “There were seven of them, and they were pretty strong. Not much of a choice. If you always worry more about their bodies

than taking enemies out as quickly and cleanly as possible, you'll sooner or later get yourself killed."

"Well, I guess you're right in a sense. And to answer your question; yes, this should be the place." Catheya nodded as she turned toward the sapphire-hued peaks. "This is the Hollowtongue Mountains, and the pearls are supposed to be hidden in a valley here."

"Hollowtongue? Pretty weird name," Zac muttered. "How hidden can the valley be in the middle of an ocean? Can't we just swim up to the surface and look around?"

"First of all, that'd make us a target for others staying within this mountain range. Secondly, this whole mountain is a natural formation. You can't enter it from above; you need to go through one of the formation eyes," Catheya explained.

"What happens if you try to cheat?" Zac asked curiously, searching for clues to the formation she mentioned.

"If you're lucky, you'll get trapped or thrown out. If unlucky, you'll be led to a death zone," Qirai said as she lazily scratched her stomach. "It's the same with a lot of places like this. Unless you have the means to see through the natural formation or the power to force your way through, you'd better avoid messing around."

"Passing through by skill is absolutely impossible considering your talent for arrays," Catheya added with a wink. "Also, natural formations contain the power of nature itself. They're harder to break open than a manufactured array."

"Your map was essentially just to lead us to a well-known mountain range?" Zac asked with a raised brow. "I've even read about this place in my public information packet."

"The pearls appear at different spots, if they appear at all during a trial. Knowing they could be found in these mountains is a huge advantage. There are hundreds of places like this out there, along with endless stretches of nothingness," Catheya said. "Besides, I'll be able to find the

general direction we need to move in. For now, let's go inside. Our battle might have drawn some attention.”

Zac took out his information packet to brush up as they swam toward one of the valleys that apparently acted as an entrance to the mountain range. There wasn't really much to go by. Nala's package didn't contain anything about this place, but another missive had a short excerpt.

The Hollowtongue Mountains were named after a specific beast that lived in large numbers in the caverns and trenches below the surface. They had tongues with stingers that contained extremely condensed Twilight Energy, which was essentially a poison to humans and the undead alike. It also mentioned the whole place was a huge confusion array just like Catheya said, and it was almost useless to trust your eyes.

The mountain range was also subtly rearranged between each trial, so preparing maps beforehand was futile. Everything was up to chance unless you had some means to traverse the mountain range, which it thankfully looked like Catheya had.

“The deal still holds. We'll harvest pearls for a week before we leave. Remember, the pearls start losing efficacy after a month, and it will take a while to absorb each. You'll probably want to find a secluded spot as quickly as possible,” Catheya said as she took out an astrolabe that looked a lot like the one she'd used to find her way in the tunnels a few months back.

“What about me?” Zac asked, pointing to the astrolabe. “You have that thing, but how will I get out of here afterward if it's a big confusion array? What if I'm stuck for three full years? I have other things on my plate.”

“We had a few simple spare compasses,” Catheya said with an odd expression. “But it turns out we sort of lost them when Varo was attacked.”

“The compasses aren't very rare though,” Qirai quickly said when she saw Zac eyeing Catheya's astrolabe. “We'll probably stumble into some people on the way, and we can

pick up a compass from them. In fact, these people we fought might have one.”

“Even without, it’s not too difficult to leave,” Catheya added with a smile. “You just need to stay in the valleys rather than the mountaintops, and travel toward what looks like the exit. You’ll run into a few dead ends, but you’ll be out within a week or two.”

“That’s fine, then.” Zac nodded as he started scanning the Cosmos Sacks of the fallen ambushers.

Unfortunately, there wasn’t anything like that in the four sacks he rummaged through. He did, however, gain over eighty Twilight Fruits in one go. It really started to become clear that killing was the most efficient method of harvesting these things. He’d only gotten his hands on thirty or so through his own efforts, while gaining more than ten times that number through kills.

In fact, the early and middle reaches were probably starting to get cleaned out by this point. If you wanted to harvest more the normal way, you’d have to enter the inner reaches where fewer cultivators roamed.

He was out of luck in his haul, but Catheya fared better, perhaps since she’d targeted the leader. She threw a wooden compass toward Zac with a smile. “Here you go. Now you don’t need to look at me with such scary eyes. This thing isn’t as nice as mine, but it’s easy to use. If you reach a crossing, the markers will point along the energy flow. If you want to leave, go in the opposite direction.”

“Great.” Zac smiled, fiddling with the compass a bit before he stowed it away.

The group entered the mountain range, and they didn’t even get the chance to move for more than a few minutes before a school of piranha-like fish shot toward them from what looked like a crystal beehive. Catheya tried to freeze them, but they bit their way through the ice block.

Zac activated [**Deathmark**], shrouding the area in a corrosive haze to take care of the frenzied beasts. He was

shocked to find the little things scuttling through the black water, barely affected. A few wraiths appeared and took out a good chunk of them in a few wide swings.

“Persistent bastards,” Qirai grunted as she released a mighty punch that contracted space itself.

Hundreds of piranhas were instantly crushed, and the rest were whittled down over the next minute. Eventually, the whole area was filled with thousands of mangled carcasses. The toothy beasts weren’t very strong, but they possessed durability that far exceeded expectations. Even their bite was quite powerful, and Zac had a few marks that bled some ichor as proof.

It was the same with Qirai, while Catheya hadn’t even dared to get bit by the things. She’d enclosed herself in a frosty barrier while sending out icicles from within.

“Are these the Hollowtongues?” Zac asked as he held a frenzied little fish in his hand, trying to see inside its maw.

“No,” Catheya said with a shake of her head as she swam over to the beehive. “Just some local wildlife. You should prepare yourself. We’ve mostly traveled inside a submersible over the past months. The beasts we’ll encounter from here on out will be far more powerful compared to the ones who lived by the shores of the starting continent.”

She formed an icy blade and cut the whole thing off from the mountain wall, prompting Zac to look over curiously.

“These guys don’t seem very palatable, but I could smell some roe inside. It seems pretty delicious,” Catheya explained.

“I didn’t take you for a foodie,” Zac commented.

“What’s the use of great longevity if you don’t fill the years with interesting things?” Catheya laughed. “It hasn’t been that long since I gained the ability to eat. There are all kinds of things I haven’t had the opportunity to try out yet.”

With Qirai carrying the still-unconscious Varo on her back, the trio continued, and Zac was promptly, utterly, lost. The natural formation was clearly messing with his senses, and when he looked back, it felt like the mountains were

completely foreign. It was lucky he'd found the compass in such a timely manner.

Cathey didn't seem to be thrown by the formation though, and they only occasionally stopped for her to find the direction with her astrolabe. They did also have to hide or detour a few times to avoid nearby groups. It wasn't really that they were afraid, but were far more interested in the Life-Death Pearls.

There would be plenty of time for looting and pillaging after they made their Dao breakthroughs.

The state of the mountain range also filled them with urgency. They passed spiritual trees now and then, including those that grew Twilight Fruits, but they'd all been plucked clean. Likely by cultivators rushing this place for easy-to-harvest treasures.

The Life-Death Pearls were supposedly in a very hard-to-find spot, but no one wanted to take detours after seeing how late to the party they already were. Eventually, Cathey started swimming up along a mountain peak.

"Follow close. We'll pass through the formation here," Cathey explained as she turned to Zac. "Can you connect us?"

"I thought we weren't supposed to climb the peaks?" Zac asked as he sent out two chains toward both Cathey and Qirai.

"We have to if we want to reach the valley," Cathey said as she looked at Zac and Qirai. "Just let me drag you two from here on out. Don't elongate the chains, and don't expel Miasma. The formation will test you, and if you expend any energy or unleash a skill, you'll put us in danger."

Zac nodded, and soon felt the pull as Cathey pushed herself forward by doing a classic breaststroke rather than pushing herself forward with Miasma. Suddenly, she simply disappeared, making it look like the chain of **[Love's Bond]** was cut off two meters ahead. Zac considered trying to catch up, but he stilled his nerves and stayed his hand.

After a while the chain turned, and his brows rose when he found himself heading straight toward a sharp piece of rock jutting out of the mountain wall. He gritted his teeth and braced himself, but the spike disappeared as he passed right through it. Things continued like this with one scene replacing another, and Zac found himself ramming into everything from illusory thorny bushes to large predatory beasts.

After half an hour it all stopped, and Zac spotted Catheya floating ahead, standing at the entrance of a valley as she played with the chain of **[Love's Bond]**. Was this another illusion? Zac looked around for a good minute before he felt he could confirm this was real.

He sighed in relief as he swam over, his nerves pretty frayed after being assaulted by an endless series of illusions for so long. His danger sense and powerful soul had ultimately told him that the things he saw were fake, but that knowledge didn't help much when you stared into the maw of a twenty-meter piranha.

"We made it," Catheya said with a smile as she saw Zac's approach.

"Only cost us half the crew," Qirai muttered with a sardonic grin as she caught up.

"Well, the core members are still around at least." Catheya sighed before she turned to Zac with a spurious smile. "I wasn't sure you'd be able to sit still for this one. A lone wolf putting his life in the hands of someone else? It's been hard on you."

"Well, I figured I was sturdy enough to take a hit or two in case the visions were real," Zac snorted. "So, this is the place? No wonder you said it was safe. You'd need some dumb luck to find this valley without the directions."

The valley was surrounded by peaks, and the only thing here were dozens of things that looked a lot like oysters spread out with a few hundred meters between them. Each was well over a meter wide, making Zac wonder just how big these Life-Death Pearls actually were.

“It’s secluded, but I doubt we’re the only group looking for this place. There’s no time to waste,” Catheya said.

“How do we harvest these things?” Zac asked. “I searched high and low for information back in Twilight Harbor, but I couldn’t find anything specific.”

“It’s not too difficult,” Catheya said as she led the group toward the closest oyster. “These things continuously feed on the ambient truths of the Twilight Ocean. You need to cut off its head and quickly infuse it with your Dao. This will trick it that it’s evolving rather than dying, and will condense all its insights into a pearl that’s somewhat similar in function to a Beast Core.”

“Can you infuse it with any Dao? Like my Axe Dao?” Zac asked curiously. “And are there any differences in the quality of the pearls depending on the Dao you use?”

“No. Your Dao is just there to trigger the process. The only benefit of a powerful Dao is that the pearl formation becomes a bit quicker,” Catheya said with a shake of her head. “And the Daos you use have to be related to Life or Death for these plants to be tricked. No one’s managed to find any other Dao type that works. Mixed-meaning Daos from different branches are fine as long as Life or Death takes a major role, but nothing else.”

MIXED MEANINGS

“Mixed Dao works, huh,” Zac muttered, looking across the valley.

His vision had been broadened quite a bit over the past forty-odd days he’d been under the tutelage of Catheya. The focus had been on skills and necromancy, but everything was interconnected when it came to cultivation. Catheya simply had a much broader vantage coming from a powerful clan in a massive empire, in addition to having a Monarch to personally guide her. The basic understanding that formed the foundation of her lessons contained as much new information as the lessons themselves.

They’d touched upon the system of Daos a bit as well when talking about upgrading skills. The last time he got some sort of rundown into how Daos were interrelated, was all the way back when he’d met Anzonil during the Hunt. He’d gathered a few more missives since then, but they were things publicly shared in a frontier sector. They were nothing compared to the information crystals Catheya got from her master.

Anzonil’s research had led him to a missive that called Chaos the original Supreme Dao that birthed the universe. The old Array Master wasn’t confident in this theory, and Zac was similarly skeptical. It was an inviting thought that his cultivation of Life and Death was one of the few true paths that led straight to the top, but the truth wasn’t quite that simple.

It turned out that while Chaos wasn't *the* Supreme Dao, it was *a* Supreme Dao.

It was one of multiple peaks—there were others just like it.

For example, the Dao of Axe was not part of either Life or Death, it turned out. Zac thought it a branch of Oblivion, where it was more part of the “Daos of Conflict” grouping along with other weapon Daos. Space and Time belonged to their own groupings as well, as did the elements.

Furthermore, his particular path leading toward Chaos wasn't part of the System's domain. Zac already guessed as much from the Aetherlord's talk about broken peaks. That reaching the absolute peak of Creation and Oblivion wasn't possible within Heaven's Path. Zac previously thought this created problems for the Undead Empire, which was so heavily steeped in Death, while still being part of the System. After all, Death was a subordinate of Oblivion.

Turns out it wasn't as big a drawback as one could expect. For one, the elemental paths, including the Dao of Ice, were within Heaven's Path, and so were the other two great heritages of the Undead Empire. It was also possible to infuse concepts of one Dao group into another, where you made one the leader.

These kinds of Daos were generally called mixed-meaning Daos, and were different from the fusions Zac had completed until now.

Dao Seeds weren't true Daos of any particular branch, but rather simple concepts that could be added into pretty much any Dao. A real mixed-meaning Dao would appear if he did something like fuse his Fragment of the Bodhi and Fragment of the Coffin into one Dao Branch.

Catheya didn't say it outright, but it sounded like this was the path she was walking. She would take her Fragment of Death and Fragment of Ice and fuse the two into the “Branch of Deathly Ice” or something similar, where her ice insights were the primary. There was an endless number of possible combinations, such as Branch of the Deathblade, which was a

common fusion of the Fragment of the Sword and various death-attuned Daos.

For a while, Zac had been confused about why people would “limit” themselves with these kinds of Daos rather than pursuing one or multiple pure paths such as himself. After all, there was a clear line from the lowest Dao Seed all the way to the Supreme Dao of Chaos when going down his path.

Certainly, reaching those heights was beyond difficult, but cultivators should have dreams, right?

Turned out that walking a mixed-meaning path had one clear benefit. As long as one of the Dao components was covered by the System, you’d be within the System’s purview, which shielded you from the wrath of the original Heavens. Zac was currently walking away from Heaven’s Path with his cultivation leading toward Chaos, which put him in the crosshairs for some nasty punishments. This would be a problem that haunted him through all his breakthroughs unless he changed his plans for his path.

He’d found that he was currently at a crossroads with two of his Daos. As things stood, he could take the Fragment of the Bodhi either toward the Branches of Nature or Branches of Life. The Branches of Nature were within Heaven’s Path, while Life was not. He could even change his path toward the Buddhist Sangha if he wanted.

The same was true with Coffin. He could either push it toward Death or Nature due to its features of rot and decay. There were no doubt other possible directions for the Dao Fragment, though he didn’t have any clear path in mind. In either case, he wasn’t technically on the Boundless Path just yet. Which was why Triv was so confused as to why he’d attracted a tribulation while still in early E-grade. It was the next step on his path that would properly place him onto the Boundless Path, for better or worse.

All this knowledge didn’t really change Zac’s plans. He still intended to move toward Oblivion and Creation, but it was important to remember how flexible the Grand Dao was. The Dao was not a series of narrow corridors leading toward

the same exit, it was an endless sea of truth where you picked what resonated with you to form your path.

Some parts of the oceans were simply uncharted territory, whereas others had already been secured by those who came before. Part of the Dao had been integrated into the System from day one, fueled by the understanding of Emperor Limitless and his followers. Actually, this all tied back to the Apostates.

It was widely believed that each of the Apostates had mastered a Supreme Dao and brought it into the System's purview. The Apostate of Order had obviously mastered the Dao of Order, but the others weren't as clear. The Beast Progenitor was believed to have added the Dao of Nature, which covered everything from beasts to plants to the seasons themselves.

The Apostate of Mercy was the one who perfected the elemental Daos. Before then, the Daos had been part of the System as an incomplete heritage. The Apostate of Greed was surprisingly the one who brought the Dao of Space into the fold, which made the Mercantile System possible, while also letting the System perform the randomizations and perfected teleportation.

The only question mark was the First Defier. Which Dao he helped perfect, if any, was obscure. His appearance was ultimately so long ago, it was impossible to confirm anything. Especially considering his reign had been extremely short-lived by all accounts. Some said ten thousand years, others a millennium. A few even claimed he reached the peak within a century.

Catheya had no idea which was the truth, but she was ultimately just a member of the young generation. There were tons of things she didn't know. For example, some still held to the belief that Chaos was the Original Dao, which was why it was impossible to master. Only by placing all the other peaks under the control of the System would there be a chance at grasping it without being reduced to nothingness.

Not that things of that sort mattered. He hadn't even pushed all his Fragments to the Peak yet. Though this excursion would hopefully remedy that.

"These things are actually plants?" Zac asked skeptically as he looked at the large oyster fifty meters away from them.

"It's a bit of a hybrid, I think." Catheya shrugged. "The lines are blurred on some beings. Just look at the treants. In either case, observe."

She threw out a Supreme Miasma Crystal, and then an icicle that cracked it. A large haze of Miasma spread out, and the oyster started to shake, rising from the ground. Only then did Zac realize it was actually attached to a thick thorned stem, and it was this stem that was rising to get closer to the dense deathly energies.

Catheya shot a blade of ice toward the Life-Death plant the moment it stopped moving upward, which caused the area to explode with activity. A dozen bladelike stalks sprang up as the "oyster" started to descend. Catheya was too quick. With a flash of ice, she passed the sharp stalks and appeared next to the plant, and it was cut off in one swift swipe.

The sharp stalks flailed about erratically, exhibiting power strong enough to take out Middle E-grade cultivators. A series of ice barriers sprang up with Catheya as the core, and she ignored the stalks as she placed her hands on the severed stem holding the oyster. A storm of deathly energies burrowed into the plant as she infused it with her Deathly Dao.

"Help me deal with the stalks, please?" Catheya asked. Zac started to sever them while Qirai gripped them and ripped them apart.

Soon enough, they stood in front of Catheya, who kept infusing the oyster with her Dao. By this point, the oyster had started to absorb large amounts of Twilight Energy from the surroundings, which Zac guessed was the cue that the process of forming the pearl had begun.

"So that's it?" Zac asked.

“That’s it.” Catheya smiled. “The process will take a few hours, and you can’t stop feeding it your Dao during that time. Harvesting is simple enough. When the pearl has formed, just crack it open and place the pearl in a sealed box.”

“There’s only three of us here,” Zac said as he looked around. “How about we split to speed things up?”

Qirai’s brows slightly furrowed, since that differed from the original plan. Catheya nodded in agreement. “Remember, we’re gathering for four, so everyone will have to chip in a bit.”

“That’s fine,” Zac agreed.

A quick scan indicated the valley held over a hundred oysters, which was better than the average trial. There were more pearls than he would be able to use, even if the group consisted of seven members. With four members remaining, he’d probably have to discard most of them. Might as well feed some to Varo so he might gain something even while in a coma.

The trio spread out, and Zac moved toward a random Life-Death plant some ways away from the other two. Zac didn’t bother coming up with some new method. He simply threw out a crystal before cracking it with a pebble. He activated his movement skill as the oyster rose toward the energy, and the world suddenly stopped. A moment later, he appeared before the stem.

The weird creature didn’t even have a chance to react before [**Verun’s Bite**] ripped through the stem. The ground heaved a bit as the root system below started to rampage from having its head cut off. The plant never had the chance to extend its weapon-like stalks this time around. Three managed to emerge and were effortlessly cut apart as Zac started to infuse the head with the Fragment of the Coffin.

The dying Life-Death plant greedily absorbed the energies Zac provided, and Twilight Energy surged toward the oyster. The swirl of energy was more condensed in his case, and Zac guessed it was because his Dao Fragment was higher compared to Catheya’s. Zac wasn’t certain, but he guessed her

ice-attuned Dao was either High or Peak mastery, while her death-attuned Dao was at the Middle-stages.

The process continued for two more hours, at which point a ripple spread out from the oyster. The ripple was rife with meaning, and Zac knew the pearl had been born. The extremely enticing Dao fluctuation caused Zac's thoughts turn to dozens of avenues for his cultivation, ruminations he pushed down as he hurried over and ripped apart the shell.

Inside was a shimmering, dark-green pearl no larger than the pearls you'd find on a necklace back on Earth. He beheld it with greed, and was a bit surprised to find he wasn't the only one. The coffin on his back shuddered, and he felt an intangible nudge of hunger in his mind, even stronger compared to when **[Love's Bond]** indicated its desire for Twilight Fruits.

"So, you want these things as well?" Zac muttered. "Well, wait until we've finished gathering them."

That Alea wanted these pearls wasn't too surprising after her interest in the Twilight Fruits, and Zac was more than happy to provide. There were more than enough pearls to go around, so it was with gusto Zac stowed the pearl into a jade box he'd prepared. The ripples disappeared a few seconds after the lid was sealed, and Zac found his mind clear once more.

Zac wanted to harvest another pearl, but he rested for half an hour as he absorbed two Soul Crystals. The process wasn't as taxing as an all-out fight, but it was more taxing than running the purification array. Half an hour of rest was enough, and Zac soon shot toward the next oyster.

Half a minute later, Zac was already infusing the oyster with his Dao. However, this time he infused the fallen plant with the Fragment of the Bodhi, though he first made sure he was performing his experiment out of sight of the other two. Catheya said the inspiration came from the plant itself, but he figured his Dao might influence the pearls at least to some extent, considering the amount he poured into the thing.

Two hours later, a second pearl was formed, and Zac curiously opened the oyster. A small smile spread across his face as he saw that this particular pearl indeed veered a bit more toward a golden hue compared to the darker pearl he'd harvested before. It also emanated ripples that were slightly more in tune with life than death, which was exactly what he was looking for. Any little advantage was needed with his weird constitution.

The days passed, and the trio worked without rest as one oyster after another was harvested. Thanks to splitting up, it took them about five days to pick the place clean.

"You were quite the farmer," Catheya laughed as they gathered. "It almost felt like your eyes were shining when you harvested these things. How many did you manage to harvest?"

"Fifty-four." Zac smiled. "What about you two?"

"As I expected." Catheya nodded. "I got 36; Qirai actually got 34. Altogether it's 124, and 31 pearls each, according to our agreement."

"I have a proposition," Zac said, drawing an interested glance from Catheya. "I'm willing to buy every pearl you don't need. Ten D-grade Nexus Coins each."

"Are you planning on selling them?" Catheya asked with a raised brow. "They'll only last a month or so, even when sealed."

"I have other uses for them." Zac shrugged.

Qirai was interested in making the deal, almost to the point of salivating, and Catheya slowly nodded. "How about we keep fifteen pearls each and sell the rest to you? That way we have a few extra in case we absorb them quicker than expected. How does that sound?"

"Perfect," Zac said and transferred 480 D-grade Nexus Coins.

"Your means once again leave me in both awe and despair," Catheya said with a smile. "Well, things turned out a

bit more hectic than I anticipated, but overall, the mission was a success. What are your plans now?”

“I’ll find someplace to seclude myself for a while,” Zac said. “This trial is a bit more dangerous than I expected, so I’ll need to make some breakthroughs before continuing alone.”

He’d wanted to do this for a while now, and not only for the pearls he’d finally got his hands on. The small hidden wounds in his body from his first node-breaking rally were pretty much fixed after these three long months, which meant he would be able to complete his second round of node-breaking. Zac didn’t know how long he had before his immunity or accumulated toxicity became a problem, but he felt he should be able to gain at least a handful of levels in this round.

Between a few levels and potential Dao breakthroughs, the power boost he stood to gain was tremendous. And that was something he desperately needed considering where he was heading next.

SECLUSION

“Alright,” Catheya said, not the least bit surprised Zac would head off on his way now that the pearls were collected. “I’ll take you out of this place before we find our own paths.”

The descent from the mountain was just as nerve-racking as the ascent, but thirty minutes later they stood in a secluded spot at the foot of a mountain, covered by five-meter-tall corals and Catheya’s arrays in case any group of trial-takers were lurking nearby.

“Remember to come look for me before this thing is over,” Catheya said as she handed Zac a crystal and a sack of herbs. “This is a method to gain even more from the pearls than just eating them as is. And try not to do anything crazy after this, alright? No causing trouble that will cause ripples on the outside.”

“Of course,” Zac smiled. “I’m not crazy.”

“Well, you seem to have a penchant for trouble,” Catheya said with a pointed look, which made Zac scratch his chin with some embarrassment.

“I’ll be careful, and I’ll find you in a year or so unless I’ve found some opportunity that’ll delay me,” Zac promised.

“I’ll look for the places you wanted.” Catheya nodded in return.

Zac swam away, heading for one of the pathways away from their current spot. A look back showed that Catheya and Qirai started moving toward another. There was no time to lose considering the pearls only lasted so long. Regardless, he

had to find a spot to seclude himself. Zac made good time as he swam through the valleys, and he didn't stop for three hours as he made his way forward with the help of his compass.

However, Zac didn't head back in the direction they came from, but rather the opposite. He was planning on passing straight through the mountain range on the way to the inner parts of the ocean, finding a cultivation cave on the way. Eventually, he found what he was looking for: a small crack in the rock that released air bubbles.

Zac hid in a dense patch of bushes and activated his movement skill. Two seconds later, the world shifted into one of death, and he flashed forward toward the crack. The intangible form of **[Abyssal Phase]** had its benefits, and he effortlessly squeezed through the path that normally wouldn't even fit his hand.

The tunnel kept going for thousands of meters into the depths without widening. Just as Zac started to consider turning back, he found himself in a large cave that was mostly filled with air. The place was roughly one hundred meters across and a bit reminiscent of his cultivation cave back home, except the land was on a ledge five meters above the water.

The Twilight Ocean formed a small subterranean river that passed below the ledge and left through another crack on the other side. The walls and ceiling were covered with the same sort of moss that had dried out the tunnels beneath the Living Pulse. There was also a lone, mysterious flower that grew on the edge of the ledge. Zac matched it with **[Palvae Granulosa]**, a medicinal plant used in top-quality race-upgrading medicinal baths.

It was a Peak E-grade plant, and each one of its twenty-some leaves was worth upwards of five thousand E-grade Nexus Coins. It wasn't a bad haul, though not something that mattered all too much to Zac. It did spread a nice aroma in the small cave, and Zac decided to leave it for now.

First things first, he needed to turn this place into a cultivation cave. He swam beneath the water and swiftly

sealed both the inlet and outlet to the river with arrays and by physically filling them with stones. It would turn the fresh water in the small river stagnant in a few months, but it didn't really matter.

Zac then added a layer of isolation arrays to the cave. He was over a thousand meters below the valley, but there were perhaps more tunnels in the mountain above. This way he was completely shut off from the rest of the world, and would be able to work on his cultivation in peace.

He cleared out a patch of moss and placed his new prayer mat before he took out two boxes. One of them held the death-attuned pearls he purchased from Catheya and Qirai, and the other held the death-attuned pearls he'd generated with the help of the Fragment of the Coffin. The coffin on his back was veritably vibrating. Zac took one pearl out from each box.

It didn't look like [**Love's Bond**] cared about what it was fed, and it opened its casket by a small degree. Zac threw one purchased pearl after another inside until he'd thrown a full thirty into the shrouded insides. That was three times more than what most cultivators managed to absorb. He was lucky he'd purchased a set of spares.

The lid snapped shut after swallowing the thirtieth pearl, and Zac sensed the coffin had entered some sort of hibernation on his back. He would probably be able to use it in a pinch, but he preferred not to disturb Alea. Instead, he focused on the second box, taking out a set of tools. He'd essentially gathered the base items for over twenty professions over his years of fighting, including a few Alchemy sets. He poured ten pearls into a large pestle from one of the sets in one go.

Zac was almost dragged into a bout of inspiration from the sounds as the small pearls clashed together in the bowl, the air beset by such pure Dao fluctuations that he could discern small runes appearing and disappearing in turn. However, they suddenly disappeared as a set of runes lit up along the pestle's rim. It was an isolation array that would trap the medicinal properties of the items being processed, and it helped Zac snap back to reality as he started to work the materials.

He followed the instructions in Catheya's crystal, grinding the pearls and a few dried herbs into a fine dust. Zac looked at the compound with hesitation when he was done and added ten more pearls. Twenty pearls was overkill, potentially harmful for most cultivators, but his body had always been greedy. He didn't want to sit down and refine another brew mid-epiphany because he made too small a dose.

The next step said to simply pour the compound in a liquid of your choice. Zac had the capability to be a bit extravagant at this point. He took out a Dao Fruit and turned it into a mush that he mixed with the powder and added some water, turning it into a proper Dao Smoothie.

The brew resembled a blueberry shake filled with gold flakes that swirled around, and it both smelled and looked delectable. Wasting no time, Zac downed the brew straight from the pestle so as not to let any of the efficacy escape. He closed his eyes and focused on the Dao avatar in his mind.

He'd thought long and hard on the route he should take with his Fragment of the Coffin over the past years, and made tons of revisions over the last half year he'd spent in his Draugr form. Half of the origin of his Dao Fragment was Hardness, something that probably was once meant to become the Fragment of the Shield for his Undying Bulwark class.

That didn't mean the insights he gathered were useless, and that they couldn't remain as a part of his path. He just needed to find a way to properly incorporate the concept, an answer he'd found during his battle with Yanub Mettleleaf.

Death was the ultimate barrier that most cultivators dreamed of breaking past on their road to eternity. But fight as they might, it was immutable and intractable, fiercely guarding the great beyond. It trapped the living in their slowly decaying bodies, and together with time, turned everyone to dust.

It was inescapable, like unbreakable chains wrapping around the targets.

Zac barely had time to set the course before he was whisked away as a miraculous wave of understanding shot into his soul. The crude concoction he'd just brewed formed a clear

line of communication with the Heavens themselves, and he sensed something vast and unending. It was just like when he'd glimpsed the corner of the Dao of Heaviness all those years ago. Though what flickered in front of him now was on a far grander scale.

Thousands and thousands of insights had been melded together to form a coherent whole that far surpassed what Zac could grasp. Each part beckoned to him, tantalized him like nymphs luring him into deeper water. He could follow the calls, meld with the nearby insights and emerge stronger for it.

But that would be to passively take whatever you were given, and that was not his path. He needed to be the one in the driver's seat, and his mind searched for the truth he hoped existed. The part of the Dao of Death he wanted to incorporate into his Fragment of the Coffin. He imagined the coffin lid closing, creating a world of its own.

There was just the inside and the outside. The world outside the coffin would eventually move on no matter who had been interred, while the insides of the coffin would become a sealed world, one where the outside world held no sway or influence. It was a world of silence and gradual decay, left forever to its own devices.

Zac held onto his truth, and it gradually matured and filled out as the Heavens themselves filled in the blanks. Things that had felt obscure and inscrutable before became as clear as day thanks to the concoction that expanded his mind to the size of the cosmos. Time passed—who knows for how long—and Zac woke up, cognizant of his surroundings again.

He was surprised to see that the cave had turned into a realm of utter death, with all the moss in the hidden cave having been reduced to various states of decay. The only thing unscathed was the spiritual flower, which seemed to have grown a few inches and gained a couple of new leaves.

A glance at an array showed he'd been out of it for seventeen full days, which shocked Zac wide awake. It was a lot longer than he expected. Then again, his gains weren't small either. Some of the efficacy would have been lost from

the remaining pearls by this point, but there wasn't much he could do about it.

Luckily, he'd already considered this issue, and had only harvested pearls with the Fragment of the Bodhi by the end, which should have helped keep the freshness to some degree. Before using them, he needed to stabilize his mind. Zac started to absorb energy from some Soul Crystals as he opened his Status Screen with anticipation.

Fragment of the Coffin (Peak): All attributes +40, Endurance +1,110, Vitality +650, Intelligence +60, Wisdom +150. Effectiveness of Endurance +20%.

There were no real increases to any attributes except Endurance and Vitality from upgrading the Dao Fragment, but Zac wasn't surprised with the result at all. His insights had delved into the sealed world of the Coffin, and to some degree, the gradual decay in this hidden domain. The aspect of the seal increased the Endurance of the coffin, and both Decay and Regeneration were linked to Vitality.

He hoped this evolution would help consolidate the aspect of Hardness better with his path, while also increasing the corrosive effect against anything caught within his domain. Most notably, it would hopefully empower the restrictive ability of skills like **[Blighted Cut]** and **[Profane Seal]**. He'd already prepared the materials to help with a self-guided skill upgrade, though Zac was leery about taking that step with his defining skills.

The clock was ticking, but he still spent a few more hours consolidating his gains and restoring his drained mind. Only when he felt like he was back in top shape did he transform to his human form and mixed a second Dao Smoothie. A moment later, he found himself part of the grand cosmos again.

Unfortunately, the effect wasn't as strong this time around, but that didn't dampen him from gaining insights and inspiration left and right. For his Fragment of the Bodhi, he knew the path to take as well, though that insight honestly wasn't quite as clear compared to his first one. It was unavoidable. He hadn't experienced much in his human form

after setting the course. Meanwhile, he'd lived as a Draugr in Twilight Harbor and the Twilight Ocean for half a year now, encountering all kinds of tribulations.

During the years he stayed back on Earth, he'd mostly pondered the resilience aspect of the Fragment of the Bodhi or the Dao of Life in general. The ability to keep standing in the face of adversity. However, he felt the insights he gained in the battle against the Twinruin Bloodstalker were more to his taste. The idea of the ruthless jungle where lives rose and fell like the tides.

His visions brought him back to the windswept badlands, where the consecrated Bodhi had created a kingdom of verdure within its canopy, where life was shielded from the harsh environment outside. However, even in such a paradise there was no such thing as peace. Space was limited, and stalks of grass vied for supremacy against bushes and small trees.

As the decades passed, species came and went, where the weak were culled to give space to the strong. Life was ever changing, and so were its creations. The great Bodhi could only set the stage. The plants within decided the outcome and the future. Zac witnessed the seasons pass, but a frown gradually etched into his lips.

Something was lacking.

The vision was rife with meaning, but it also felt hollow, imperfect. He sensed he could break through right now if he so desired by borrowing a bit from the vast tapestry of Life, but he couldn't guarantee that the result would be perfectly aligned with his path. Perhaps it was because of his lacking foundation; perhaps it was because of the reduced efficacy of the second batch of Life-Death Pearls.

He felt himself heading toward a precipice, and he had to make a decision. The next moment, he forcibly dragged himself out of the epiphany as a huge vortex erupted in his soul. This wasn't the vortex of his soul-strengthening method, but rather the vortex hidden inside his Dao avatar.

It was **[Spiritual Void]** that had finally been released from its shackles, and it greedily swallowed all the lingering medicinal efficacy of his smoothie. Zac noticed another eleven days had passed, and the remaining pearls were close to going bad. **[Love's Bond]** was still in a state of fugue, so it looked like Alea had eaten her fill just like when Verun got its hands on some nice resources.

He didn't want to waste the remaining pearls, and he prepared a third and final smoothie, though he didn't waste one of his few remaining Dao Treasures on this one. He'd found three of them from his numerous battles inside the trial, so he wasn't out quite just yet, but this smoothie wasn't for the Fragment of the Bodhi.

A surge of mysterious energies entered his mind as Zac swallowed the concoction, and it was all consumed by **[Spiritual Void]**. The node was already filled with his mental energy, so he guessed this extra energy would go toward pushing the hidden node toward an evolution.

The process was slow, and Zac slowly went over the result of his initial session. It was a bit of a letdown that he'd not quite managed to get where he wanted to go with this session. But the final Dao Fragment was right at the precipice, just missing the final puzzle piece that would turn an incomplete picture into something perfect.

And Zac wasn't too worried. His cultivation path was one forged through combat, and he would have ample chances to fight in his human form soon enough. There were plenty of targets to go around in this place.

RUNEBINDER

Zac spent the next few hours stabilizing his mind and getting back to perfect condition. The final snippet to evolve Bodhi still eluded him. He knew all too well the Dao couldn't be forced, especially not for him. Sitting around pondering was all but useless with his affinities.

He did eventually realize what was responsible for the sense of wrongness in his epiphany. It was related to the source of his vision.

The scene of the fighting species beneath the Bodhi tree was just like how he conceptualized how he should fight in his human form. But his Evolutionary Stance was not just Bodhi, it also contained his understanding of the axe. It wasn't pure, like the Dao of Life he needed to move toward. The vision he created for the Fragment of the Coffin was both a proper concept of its own and a link to his Inexorable Stance.

At least he'd formed a proper framework. The part of his epiphany that worked was based on change. Conversely, his insight into his death-attuned Fragment represented finality. Life and death; Creation and Oblivion.

Though his Dao progress had come to a stop, there were more things to work on. Even after spending close to a month in seclusion, he wasn't quite done. First, he spent three days filling up his empty nodes on his human side, pushing his level to 109 with the help of a stack of Supreme Nexus Crystals and the energy his **[Void Heart]** kept spitting out as it purified the Twilight Energy.

Only then did he swap back to his undead form and take out another set of **[Aethergate Pills]**.

The odd sense of damage and weakness was gone, which should allow him to go for a few levels. A surge of energy entered his body when he swallowed one of the pills, but he frowned and threw one more pill into his mouth, feeling the lacking energy that shot toward his node. The damage was recovered, and the accumulated pill toxicity was within what was acceptable. The downside was his building immunity to the **[Aethergate Pills]**.

Thankfully he came here with a backup plan, and swapped to his human form after having broken open two nodes with **[Aethergate Pills]**. One pill had almost opened three nodes the first time around, but these two nodes alone had forced him to take seven pills. The Supreme leveling pills weren't usable in his human form, but that was fine by Zac, and he took out another inlaid box.

Inside were the best leveling pills the hired attendant could get her hands on, and Zac felt a powerful surge in his body after swallowing the shimmering amber-colored pill. They weren't as potent as the **[Aethergate Pills]**, but they had a greater effect when considering the immunity he'd built up toward those specific pills.

He once more entered the slow but steady cycle of gaining levels and filling nodes with Supreme Crystals. Zac sighed and stopped after he forced open five nodes in total. The result wasn't as good as back in Twilight Harbor, and the damage to his body was almost at the same level. Each node became harder to break open than the one before. Besides, both his immunity and accumulated pill toxicity would become a problem if he went any further.

His **[Purity of the Void]** was fast at work, but much of its efforts went into expelling the invasive energies from his body, leaving most of the accumulated pill toxicity untouched. Zac couldn't be sure, but he probably wouldn't be able to gain any levels this way again inside the Twilight Ocean unless he found an opportunity that cleansed his body like the lava bath had.

Until then, he would have to do things the old-fashioned way.

The [**Chainbreaking Pills**] were still waiting to be tested, as was the [**Stone of Hope**]. Hopefully, he'd get the opportunity to try those things as soon as the imperceptible damage to his foundation healed. For now, Zac spent another week filling up his levels with the help of Supreme Miasma Crystals on his undead side until both sides were maxed out.

Name: Zachary Atwood

Level: 114

Class: [E-Epic] Fetters of Desolation

Race: [D] Draugr – Void Emperor (Corrupted)

Alignment: [Earth] Port Atwood – Planetary Lord

Titles: [...] Peak Power, Monarch-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 – Peak, Fragment of the Coffin – Peak, Fragment of the Bodhi – High

Core: [E] Duplicity

Strength: 7,599 [Increase: 105%. Efficiency: 238%]

Dexterity: 3,406 [Increase: 75%. Efficiency: 187%]

Endurance: 6,019 [Increase: 96%. Efficiency: 238%]

Vitality: 4,558 [Increase: 84%. Efficiency: 228%]

Intelligence: 1,345 [Increase: 69%. Efficiency: 187%]

Wisdom: 2,545 [Increase: 76%. Efficiency: 187%]

Luck: 435 [Increase: 91%. Efficiency: 197%]

Free Points: 140

Nexus Coins: [D] 938,235

Zac looked at the numbers with satisfaction. Just over half a year had passed since the events with his mother, and his attributes had essentially increased by 60% since. Add to that the increased combat prowess of forming his two combat stances, his improved Daos, and his Dao Braiding, and his combat power was pretty much doubled.

Even Heaven's Chosen would probably be shocked if they heard of such cultivation speed. They might even form a heart demon if they learned it was a mortal who made such strides.

Dao and levels dealt with, Zac allocated his free points into an even split between Strength and Wisdom before he took out a number of array flags. The added Wisdom was to make up for his latest Dao improvements barely providing any points into Wisdom, and to hopefully help facilitate what he was about to do next.

It was time to upgrade the first of his skills.

His mind still held some lingering inspiration after swallowing the Life-Death Pearls, and his understanding of the Dao had taken a step forward. He wanted to use this wave of momentum to make his first manual skill upgrade. There were some risks involved. Ultimately, it was a step he would have to take sooner or later. The experience would also allow him to get a practical understanding of the process, and show him where he needed to further improve.

As for the skill he'd decided to evolve: **[Indomitable]**. Mentalists were a lot more common in this place compared to back in Zecia. Now that he was heading toward the depths of the sector, he wanted to strengthen his mental defenses even if his soul was stronger than most people's. An F-grade skill wasn't enough to block out a Peak E-grade Mentalist's attack, and he couldn't trust a series of fortuitous encounters to save him every time he ran into someone like Vilari's predecessor.

At the same time, it wouldn't be the end of the world if **[Indomitable]** lost a bit of its efficacy when reaching E-grade due to Zac's lack of experience in upgrading skills. It should be one of the most straightforward evolutions since Zac didn't want to change a single thing with the skill except its grade. It

would be far more complicated to upgrade [**Vanguard of Undeath**], for example, where he wanted to remove the requirement of a shield to activate it.

Zac lit a set of incense and sat down in the middle of the [**E-grade Fractal Framework Array**]. Evolving or modifying a skill could be done in two ways. The first was to do everything by hand, following one's own intuition and understanding of a skill. The second way was to use prepared tools to help facilitate the process.

The former method was mainly used if you were an extreme talent or if you had gotten your hands on some sort of treasure that provided you with an epiphany. The latter was the method used by more than 99% of all cultivators, and any sect or clan would have specific array chambers for that very purpose.

Zac was well aware of his limitations. Freestyling it with his zero affinities and clumsy energy control was essentially asking for trouble. That was why he'd paid a premium to get the best portable arrays money could buy. Success still depended on Zac and his understanding though, so this was essentially a final exam of his studies with Catheya.

The array hummed to life and Zac closed his eyes. He focused on the skill fractal in his mind, and took a steadying breath before he made his move. His soul shuddered as the connectors between the skill fractal and his pathways were severed in an instant, after which he surrounded the skill with dense layers of mental energy.

This was the first step of a skill evolution, the severing needed to make the patterns malleable. He carefully moved the fractal out of his body and infused it onto an empty disk. The disk lit up, and a perfect copy of the skill fractal appeared with an aquamarine luster as a hologram above it. Zac felt a steady drain on his mind, as a continuous infusion of mental energy was required to keep the fractal stable.

The circular fractal that made up [**Indomitable**] contained tens of thousands of miniature patterns that formed a cohesive whole, and Zac marveled at the design. It was like gazing at

the patterns on a seashell, but thousands of times more complex. Some truths were hidden in those fractals, like how mathematical formulas hid within the spiral patterns of the shells.

His mind started to wander, perhaps still a bit affected by the Life-Death Pearls, and Zac hurriedly refocused. He'd already made a plan based on his years of study along with Catheya's teachings, and he started to send out tendrils of mental energy to manipulate the hologram. He sensed many streams of energy entering the disk that held his actual skill fractal.

This was a bit like those surgery robots on Earth, where Zac would modify the enlarged hologram as the array made the actual changes to the skill fractal. It increased the energy expenditure in return for lowering the difficulty, and Zac was more than willing to pay that price.

What Zac needed to accomplish in this process was both easy and difficult. He didn't need to change any functions, so he could simply increase the density of patterns in the skill to allow it to exhibit greater strength. It was just like how engineers fit more and more transistors on microchips back on Earth to increase their computing power.

That would turn it into an Early E-grade skill, after which the System would take charge of the modifications of the pattern when it upgraded to Middle proficiency and so on. Then again, the better the foundation Zac created, the more functions the System would be able to add. Conversely, wouldn't fix any mistakes of his. Imperfections of his own making would have to be resolved by himself.

Zac started the process by redrawing one section of the circular pattern, an area that housed the patterns designed to store energy. These were usually the safest ones to upgrade in the start, and they often helped stabilize the rest of the progress. There were thousands of such interlocked patterns on his skill fractal.

One F-grade storage pattern was turned into nine interlocking ones, where one E-grade core was surrounded by

eight supporters. The first transformation took a bit of time, but each change went quicker and quicker until he managed to replace a pattern in just over a second. Rushing the work wasn't optimal, but there was a time limit on this process.

He needed to form the evolved skill fractal and reattach it to his pathways before he ran out of steam. Otherwise, he'd cripple the fractal or even lose it altogether.

The skill fractal kept changing over the next hours, though most of the modifications Zac performed were so fine, they wouldn't even be recognizable from a distance. He quickly realized that having a plan was all well and good, but some issues could only be discovered when in the heat of it. Certain sections upgraded just fine, but small problems kept cropping up when his schematics didn't hold up in the real world.

Sometimes it was his instincts that indicated something was wrong. That wasn't just a blind gut feeling, but rather a dissonance between his Dao understanding and the patterns in front of him. Other times it was his array helping by pointing out imbalances, feedback loops, or energy leakages through the fractals.

By themselves, most of these small imperfections wouldn't be a problem, but they could snowball into something serious that would be nigh impossible to fix without reworking the whole fractal. This was thankfully where the huge number of practical examples Catheya had shared came in handy, as many of the issues he encountered were well-documented. He just needed to slightly modify the skill fractal to accommodate these changes, and the array stopped beeping ominously.

Sometimes he kept going on a section even after the array stopped any warnings. A workable and perfect pattern were two completely different things. Zac kept adjusting the patterns and the balance between things like defensive runes and Dao-infusion runes until he reached a perfect state.

As to what perfection was, it was hard to say. It once more came back to his gut. Like how you could get a completely different impression from two different paintings that looked fairly similar on the surface.

Zac's vision was starting to become blurry the longer he slugged on. Even with his unusual amount of mental energy, he was starting to feel hard-pressed to keep up his focus. He tried to lessen the strain with the help of Soul Crystals, but it was only prolonging the inevitable. He was forced to work faster and faster until he almost completely relied on the array to make suggestions that were decent rather than perfect.

A new skill fractal without any obvious fault was eventually born. It looked 90% like the original pattern, but Zac had been forced to add two small sections to the skill fractal that glommed onto its sides. A series of imperfections along with the need to adjust the pattern to his E-grade pathways forced him to add the new sections to retain the functionality. It looked a bit ugly, and it wasn't perfect, but it would get the job done.

The only downside he could spot was that it would take slightly longer to activate the stronger state of the mental defense skill, and it would cost a bit more to run.

He'd spent too much time getting each part just right in the beginning, leaving too much work to be done by the end. Zac pressed his hand against the disk holding the fractal, and felt the new-and-improved skill fractal enter his body and move to its previous position. He arduously reattached the fractal to hundreds of small pathways, and his Miasma smoothly ran through it without issue.

A breath of relief escaped from Zac's lips just as the array powered down. It was a success. He opened his Skill Screen to take a look at the result.

[E] Indomitable – Proficiency: Early. The will of the underworld is intractable, undeterred by the screams of the bound. Upgradeable.

As expected, the result was the same skill as before except that it was now E-grade. However, Zac noted with some interest that the flavor text had changed. The old text said: "*A vanguard of undeath moves forth, undeterred by the whispers of those who wish to impede the crusade.*"

Zac guessed the flavor text was changed to represent how it was now fitted with his Fetters of Desolation class. The adjustments weren't enough to turn it into a new skill though, which was fine by him. Upgrading the skill had also come with another advantage; he'd gained a new title.

**[Runebinder: Manually evolve a skill while in E-grade.
Reward: Base Attributes +50.]**

Zac had already looked into the matter, and was relieved when he saw the result. There were various levels of the title, with the worst one being Runebreaker. You'd get that skill if you messed up so badly, the skill was degraded to the point of being relegated to a lower tier. There was also Runemaster, the version where you evolved a skill and it actually became stronger than before, like turning a High-quality skill into a Peak-quality one.

Runebinder was right in between, meaning he'd lost some efficacy when adding his modifications, but not to the point that the skill went from a Peak-quality skill to a High-quality skill. That was actually above expectation for his first try. He just needed to incorporate what he'd learned and figure out solutions to the things that confused him during the process. Then he could keep evolving some of the simpler skills.

In addition to the rune series of titles, there was an even better version where you created a skill from scratch. If you managed to create a Peak-quality skill on your own before reaching D-grade, you'd reportedly get a top-tier title. Zac had to set aside any thoughts of getting that title for now. He wasn't confident in even creating a Low-quality skill, let alone a Peak-quality.

In a perfect world, he would keep upgrading every single one of his skills before setting out, but he felt like the moment had passed. He might have dared to upgrade a few more of the simple ones if his mind had still been in a state of elevated clarity. Unfortunately, the energies of the Life-Death Pearls were completely processed, and he was back to his normal unenlightened self.

Besides, he still didn't feel confident in evolving skills like **[Profane Seal]**, even if he had the liquid courage of the Dao Smoothies. Not only was it a finisher with many interlocking parts, which made the pattern far more complex compared to **[Indomitable]**, it also contained more than ten times the number of patterns to modify.

Zac would have to make some major sacrifices in efficacy if he wanted to upgrade the skill with his current accomplishments.

His goal accomplished, it was time to set out. His soul sea had been even further augmented during his month-long seclusion, and he needed to get going before it was too late.

It was time to set course for the Twilight Chasm.

MARKED FOR DEATH

Zac glanced at the lonesome plant some distance away, and eventually decided to let it live out its life. It had accompanied him for over a month in this place, and had even been marked by his Dao. It seemed a waste to harvest it. Zac instead turned to the large coffin leaning against the wall.

[Love's Bond] hadn't changed outwardly, but it felt more corporeal in a way he couldn't really explain. He checked to see if it was done absorbing the pearls, and it shuddered when he placed his hand against the lid. Zac's eyes widened as two of the chains extended from the holes in the side of their own accord, each gently caressing him before they retracted.

Almost...

It was just a whisper in his mind, and the connection broke immediately after, but it made Zac's heart shudder. It was undeniable—Alea's voice. As for the meaning, he understood it after inspecting the Spirit Tool. **[Love's Bond]** was on the verge of some sort of evolution.

He still wasn't completely certain, but he believed the Spirit Tool was still Peak-quality F-grade, where it could keep up with him with some difficulty. Then again, he'd seen how the chains weren't really powerful enough to restrain warriors like Yanub Mettleleaf, and he wasn't too sure its skills would be much good against the enemies he faced nowadays.

A proper evolution would let **[Love's Bond]** explode with power. More importantly, such an evolution might actually help heal Alea's soul. Tool Spirits' grades were based on the

grade of the Spirit Tool, so upgrading [**Love's Bond**] would essentially mean a soul awakening for the Poison Mistress, unless there were hidden restrictions Zac didn't know about.

For now, she was in a dormant state, though the Spirit Tool had finished its absorption. He equipped the coffin on his back again, filled with a renewed sense of motivation. He didn't have anything else to feed her, but the place where he was heading supposedly had the greatest number of hidden treasures.

Zac had gone back and forth on whether he should head straight to the Twilight Chasm and get rid of the weird egg, or if he should travel the inner reaches for a bit in search of opportunities. Eventually, he decided to go straight for the chasm. First of all, the hidden brand was like a sword hanging over his head, and he was extremely eager to get rid of it.

Secondly, it was a matter of being able to deal with the energies inside the chasm. He could feel [**Void Heart**] approaching its limits in being able to deal with the Twilight Energy, and he needed his soul oceans to pick up some of the slack. If he waited too long, the oceans would be filled, and he'd have lost part of what made him so resilient against the Twilight Energy.

Finally, it was a matter of caution when it came to the Remnants. Things had gotten out of hand when he absorbed the Shard of Creation, and he was afraid something similar would happen when he took on the second set. He might even be forced to leave the Twilight Ascent early, which would be a death sentence if the egg was still in his Spatial Ring.

He didn't want to wait a moment longer, and shot through the narrow cracks after clearing the blockages to let water once more flow through the cave. Zac didn't immediately return to his corporeal form upon exiting the nondescript crack, continuing to speed away from where he emerged. He didn't know why, but he felt a tinge of danger the moment he exited, even if he didn't see anything amiss.

It was like the pressure of a looming threat. Zac figured it was because there were cultivators nearby. Spotting him was

difficult in his intangible form, but he trusted his instincts in not reappearing right in front of the crack. He only transformed after having moved thousands of meters away.

However, his carefulness soon proved futile. He only had time to swim for five minutes before he sensed a number of auras bearing down on him. He frowned when they seemed to be targeting him specifically. A moment later, a group of four cultivators appeared, all clearly part of the same faction, judging by their attire.

Zac's initial instinct was to escape, except these people's auras weren't too oppressive. He adopted a wait-and-see approach.

"Finally, you appeared! We were starting to worry you died in there!" the girl who looked like the leader said with annoyance. "You might have avoided our trap, but we've hunted far wiler prey than you."

Zac wondered what the hell she was talking about. What trap? It sounded like they'd spotted him entering the crack in the mountain. Had they set something up right outside to catch him unaware when he emerged? Too bad for them his high Luck made a mockery of most such preparations.

"Who are you? What do you want?" Zac asked as he tried to get a read on them.

The girl in the lead emitted the aura of a Peak E-grade cultivator with decent accumulations, and the rest weren't far behind. However, Zac's attributes were already starting to reach a state where he could match those at the Peak E-grade, except the old bottlenecked elites and the Heaven's Chosen.

This group might think they had the advantage, with Zac's aura at the same level as their leader's, but their effective combat strength should be halved this far into the trial grounds. He was likely seen as an easy target considering they'd called him prey. They were in for a surprise.

"What do we want? Money, of course," The leader laughed as she projected an image showing Zac's face as his voice echoed out. The voice recording was from when he'd bought

the **[Stone of Hope]**. “Did you think you could spend almost fifty thousand D-grade Nexus Coins and not cause any waves? You might have a Dao Guard outside, but that won’t save you here.”

Zac’s expression sank when he saw the image, though he wasn’t too surprised. The events at the auction had spread far and wide. It was only a matter of time until some people discovered his “real” name and face. His Arcaz Black identity had no doubt been added to some information missive listing good candidates to rob during the trial.

“This is just perfect,” Zac said as **[Verun’s Bite]** appeared in his hand. “I needed some targets to test a few things out.”

The leader sneered and was about to retort, but her eyes widened when Zac was suddenly right in front of her, teleported by the initiator of **[Profane Seal]**. They’d been ready for battle though, and spread out the moment Zac made his move. Luckily for him, their thoughts were still on attack rather than escape, allowing the cage to trap them without issue.

This class didn’t have any skill to take them all out in an instant like he had with the Havarok squad, so Zac decided to target the leader with a blitz. The second fractal on **[Verun’s Bite]** had already lit up, indicating its cutting force had temporarily been boosted by a great degree, and the area was awash with sanguine luster as Zac swung the axe at the leader.

A wall of ice appeared to block his strike. It was cut apart thanks to the terrifying sharpness of a Peak-mastery Fragment of the Axe. A dozen ice flowers appeared behind the broken wall, but Zac’s attack was inexorable as it wove between them like a specter. Try as she might, she wouldn’t be able to delay the inevitable. While the odd movement didn’t appear fast, it had passed through the second layer of defenses in an instant, striking straight at the ice mage herself.

For an instant, it looked like Zac hit a crystal statue instead of a cultivator, as she’d transformed through some means. She was soon returned to flesh and blood, and launched through the water from the impact. Huge jagged wounds covered her

body, and her aura was already unsteady. She managed to survive the ambush though, and desperately fended off four spectral chains while popping a healing pill.

Still, a wound like that wasn't something you'd recover from in a minute or two, and she'd gone from the biggest threat to the weakest one in the bunch.

A deep crack spread on one of the towers of **[Profane Seal]** as a bulky warrior punched it, a black mountain hovering above his head. He didn't manage to break out before Zac had a chance to release his other attacks. First came **[Fields of Despair]**, followed by **[Deathmark]**, **[Vanguard of Undeath]**, and **[Profane Exponents]**. Wave after wave of suppression and death spread through the cage, while multiple beacons of life lit up to ward against Zac's layered domains.

Only, Zac had not one, but five domains active: three from his skills, his taunting aura making any action difficult, and a massive Dao Field from his recently evolved Fragment of the Coffin, which in turn was boosted almost a whole tier by **[Spiritual Void]**. Perhaps if they had some sort of War Array, they'd be able to rip apart his domains like that terrifying treeman, but it didn't look that way.

"Break out!" the leader shouted, looking around with trepidation. She had already felt the brunt of his might, and clearly wanted nothing more to do with him. But how could Zac let them come and go as they pleased?

He swam toward the man who seemed to possess the greatest pure offensive force, but the other two moved to intercept and give their ally time to break the cage. One appeared in a flash and stabbed forward, forming a lance of condensed lightning. The coffin pygmy behind Zac conjured a large barrier just in time before the crackling spear of light slammed into him.

The lightning was relentless, and while its main force was blocked, some tendrils still found their way around the barrier and through the cracks in Zac's armor. His body was getting scorched, inundated by a series of powerful lightning bolts. However, Zac's effective Endurance had actually passed

15,000 if he added in the boost from **[Vanguard of Undeath]**. It would take a lot more than a secondary blast to impede his path.

The lightning rogue seemed about to launch another attack, but had to flash away as a ruthless axe almost cut her head clean off. It was a spectral warrior from **[Deathmark]** making a silent entrance. Three more had already appeared close to the others and forced them to split their attention.

The earth-aspected warrior had already received a first deathmark since he chose to forcibly block its strike by petrifying his arm, and his face turned beet red from the pain of the corrosive storm that flooded him through the mark. The others chose to dodge, the far smarter option of the two.

Seeing that the target had turned into an arc of lightning to escape the axe, the wraith turned its attention to the final warrior, who'd stopped some distance away. He was currently forming an intricate fiery array that screamed of might. His progress was stalled as he was forced to conjure barriers to block out both a number of spectral chains from **[Profane Seal]** along with the ghosts.

Zac was fast turning into an army of one as the chains of **[Love's Bond]** also joined the melee, and **[Fields of Despair]** provided him with nigh omniscience inside the cage. It allowed him to be everywhere with his chains, wraiths, and attacks, keeping constant and unrelenting pressure on all four cultivators at once.

Their initial goal had been to escape his cage. Efforts that were quickly reduced to a passive state of defending against a ceaseless assault from every direction.

The fire-aspected Array Master was constantly being interrupted, but he was still desperately setting up what looked to be a massive attack. He needed to go. Zac barreled toward him instead of chasing the lightning user. The Array Master erected a huge blockade to bar his path. The barrier didn't even get a chance to show its might before blue fire started to eat through it like corrosive acid. A jagged scar appeared in

front of Zac's bardiche from activating [**Gorehew**] as he closed the last of the distance.

A massive spike appeared out of the Void, reminiscent of the earth punishment of [**Nature's Punishment**]. It naturally came from the earthen warrior who almost managed to destroy [**Profane Seal**] before. He'd already destroyed the axe wraiths harassing him while taking on another mark, and he now aimed to cause a breach in Zac's cage with a massive finisher.

Just as the spike was about to slam into the cracked tower, a pitch-black haze swallowed it whole, and a wail echoed as the lightning rogue suddenly found herself impaled on its sharp tip, her blood forming a crackling cloud at the opposite side of the cage.

The scream caused a slight distraction in the fire-attuned Array Master, and Zac's five-meter jagged edge, empowered with the Fragment of the Axe, ripped through the final barrier before it continued into the body of the man. A fiery rune appeared to protect him, but it was dim and weak. Perhaps from Zac's domains, perhaps because of the Mystic Realm. It exhausted a small part of Zac's force before [**Gorehew**] pushed through and ripped his body to pieces.

Zac didn't stop there, turning into a puff through a bloodline-activated [**Abyssal Phase**], and the Earth Warrior found himself decapitated before he had a chance to see who struck him. Zac was only easing his suffering though, as he'd been slowly dying from the two marks of [**Deathmark**].

A third surge of energy entered his body almost at the same time as the Earth Warrior died. The chains of [**Profane Seal**] had caught the rogue the moment she was unexpectedly stabbed through Zac's usage of [**Profane Exponents**].

Like most lightning cultivators, her forte was speed, and the moment she was caught, a group of axe wraiths finished her off. They might not have been a match to her outside the trial, but since Zac wasn't suppressed in here, then neither were his summons. That left only the half-crippled leader, who desperately struggled to escape.

A storm of ice spread through the whole arena as she unleashed everything she had in an effort to destroy the cage before it was too late. She was pushing herself as the wounds across her body worsened. Unfortunately for her, the whole area was suffused in the corrosion of **[Deathmark]**, and over half of the ice shards were reduced to nothing before they could even hit anything.

The rest found their efficacy lowered because of the other restrictions. Many even veered away from hitting the walls, instead turning toward Zac because of the taunting effect of **[Vanguard of Undeath]**. Still, Zac felt he would only be able to maintain his cage a bit longer. This was, after all, a Peak E-grade warrior beating on an F-grade skill.

If not for his recently evolved Dao Fragment, it would long have fallen apart between her and the Earth Warrior's attacks. Zac activated **[Abyssal Phase]** with his bloodline and flashed over, but suddenly felt a sharp pain as he was dragged back into his corporeal form with a few wounds.

The ice mage had unleashed a second, even deadlier storm within twenty meters around her, containing enough force to disturb space itself.

"I'll pay! Just let me leave," she entreated with despair, gaze bouncing between the three unmoving bodies floating behind Zac.

"I'm a guy who spent tens of thousands of D-grade coins, remember?" Zac snorted. "What need do I have of your ransom?"

"You'll regret this!" she screamed with madness in her eyes and shot toward the wall of **[Profane Seal]**.

The inner storm around her was like a mobile meatgrinder, and it ripped apart the cage in less than a second. And that small delay allowed Zac to catch up. Four powerful chains braved the storm and gripped the cultivator tight. Her body emitted sizzling sounds as the corrosion of **[Blighted Cut]** empowered by his upgraded Fragment of the Coffin rapidly corroded her body. She screamed in pain as she fiercely struggled to get free.

Unfortunately for her, she was well and truly stuck. Zac didn't waste any time as he activated the finishing function of the skill. Three extremely sharp cuts ripped the leader's body apart. Just before she died, a weird crystal appeared in her hands.

It looked like a firework had gone off inside the red haze of her blood. Zac dodged a shimmering projectile, but he swore with surprise when it changed trajectory and shot right for him. A barrier from **[Profane Exponents]** appeared to block, but the light flew around it like it was a living thing.

The light entered Zac's body and thousands of small crystals shot out and soared across the mountain range. Zac barely managed to catch one before it flew away. The bloody water soon cleared, and he saw the head of the leader drifting some distance away, her face locked in a twisted visage of reluctance and hatred.

“Shit.”

He had a pretty good idea of what she'd done just before losing her life. Infusing energy into the crystal he'd caught confirmed it. She'd used some sort of Tracking Array or a Revenge Array as it was sometimes called. It was all too common for people to meet their end in Mystic Realms, and most wanted to drag their killer with them to hell as a final act of defiance. This array had marked him, while the shards could be used to find the mark.

Luckily, the message was short and succinct, and didn't contain any of his secrets. The Elementalist had mostly focused on his wealth. The only mention of his skills was that he used chains and a cage. Zac understood her reasoning. Justice wouldn't move many of the cultivators hiding in this mountain range, but wealth would. And if she made him out to sound like a Heaven's Chosen, who would dare attack him?

Time was of the essence, and Zac looked inward to find the brand with **[Spiritual Anchor]**. Thankfully it hadn't managed to blend with his pathways just yet, and he moved to seal it with a layer of mental energy and his Dao. He was about to destroy it, but suddenly stopped, as he had an idea.

He would be able to remove the mark easily enough, but did he really need to? He was still a good distance from the depths of the Mystic Realm, and there shouldn't be too many peak warriors staying in this area. If there were people ready to kill him for his wealth, why not rob them of theirs?

INTO THE ABYSS

“Are we really doing this?” Kurtz frowned as he looked at the small crystal encased in layers of his mental energy. “We saw the fallout ourselves at the auction. He has the protection of a Monarch outside. Besides, you’ve heard the rumors. Something odd is going on this trial, and a character like this might be involved in the upheavals.”

“Our options are limited,” Havan sighed. “We have reached an impasse, treading water for three centuries. The offers from the established factions have already dried up. We can’t give up our freedom for a chance at Hegemony any longer even if we wanted.”

Kurtz and Fathela begrudgingly agreed. They’d been so full of vigor two hundred years ago, waving off the invitations of clans and sects alike. They’d reached the Peak of E-grade in just thirty years and already gained renown in the circles of wandering cultivators. What need was there for them to sell their souls? For the next fifty years things were fine, and the trio of childhood friends kept making improvements to shore up their foundations even further.

Then their progress simply stopped.

How Kurtz wished he could go back in time and shake some sense into his younger self. There was no shame in joining an established force, to take part in the wisdom of the predecessors. Now they were impossibly stuck at the bottleneck, feeling their momentum drying up.

It wasn't inconceivable they'd find the opportunity to take the next step inside the Twilight Ascent, it was just ultimately a long shot. Even if they did, it might not be enough for all three. The opportunity in front of them, however, was different.

"This Arcaz Black definitely has a terrifying background... He spent over fifty thousand D-grade Nexus Coins on that auction. Even if we just get that necklace and nothing else, we can reforge our fate by selling it to the Veilplume Monarch after things have died down," Havan said. "I think we can get ten thousand D-grade Nexus Coins from her, more than enough for us to make an earnest attempt at Hegemony."

"And who knows what else he has in his Spatial Ring," Fathela added, indicating his stance on the matter. "I don't think this will kill our dream, but rather the opposite. We need power to get to that place."

Kurtz took a deep breath, steeling his resolve. What Fathela said was true. Killing a noble Draugr might cause trouble, limiting their chances at making it to the Heartlands. But what about now? Not even the local tyrants were extending invitations, let alone any of the factions with their roots in the Undead Empire.

"Alright," Kurtz said as he took out three vials. "If we do this, we need to go all out."

"You old goat, you still had these?" Havan blurted, his eyes shining with delight. "With this, our chances are even greater."

They immediately turned their thoughts to action and set out through the labyrinthian gullies and canyons of the Hollowtongue Mountains. They knew the general direction of the target, but reaching him would still require some effort. As expected, it took almost four hours and a lot of doubling back to close in on him, and that was only because he hadn't moved since they set out.

It had been quite a chore to find a path leading inside the secluded valley. Their target sat on a rock five hundred meters

away with a large coffin on his back and a brutal axe in his right hand. His long silver-gray hair swayed in the water as he calmly looked at Kurtz and his companions' approach. His features were pristine.

Kurtz felt a palpable pressure on his soul even from this distance. This was a true pureblood, perhaps even a direct lineal descendant by how the very core of his being became subdued by his mere gaze. Arcaz Black was nothing like the diluted bloodlines of the local factions.

Kurtz snapped out of the reverie as he started to analyze the man as an enemy combatant. The choice of weapon seemed a bit odd to Kurtz, and not in line with what he expected from a Draugr noble. Perhaps if it was an Izh'Rak Reaver with their predilection toward physical carnage.

Besides, beascrafted weaponry wasn't too popular among their kind since they always held a hint of life. It was possible to transform the Tool Spirits into deathly beast spirits, but the exorbitant cost didn't justify the benefit. Why all the hassle when you could create a natural death-attuned Tool Spirit by crafting and using the right materials from the start? Was it perhaps a quirk of the obscenely wealthy? Or had this Arcaz Black lost his real weapon and was making do?

A value of 500–750 soon appeared over the Draugr's head, which was a bit of a surprise. From what they'd gathered it was too low for a Dao Branch, though too high for a Peak Fragment. Did he possess two death-attuned Fragments and was working on fusing them into a singular branch? That would mean he most likely had yet another Dao since pure death needed to be mixed with something else.

'*Triple Fragments?*' Fathela's voice echoed in his mind, mirroring his own guess.

Despite putting them at a small disadvantage, three Fragments weren't necessarily much stronger than their own dualities. They also had numbers and teamwork on their side. If they'd met a few years later, they might have delivered themselves for slaughter. As long as the young master didn't

possess a proper branch, Kurtz felt they had a good chance to walk away victorious.

“Arcaz Black,” Kurtz greeted, scanning the secluded valley.

Judging from what they’d learned about the Hollowtongue Mountains, there should only be one entrance and exit to a valley like this unless there was some hidden passage the Draugr lordling had found. Arcaz Black was definitely not a fool. Him coming here and not moving for six hours was definitely not him thinking he was in the clear.

It was an invitation.

Kurtz wasn’t surprised, and neither were Havan or Fathela. It was extremely suspicious the mark had lingered for a full week as it made its way through the mountains. There was no way they were the first party to follow the call. Even if Arcaz Black didn’t notice anything amiss at first, he should have figured something out soon enough and removed the tracking brand.

“It’s just the three of you?” the young Draugr said as his eyes moved back and forth between their squad.

Kurtz shuddered when those abyssal orbs passed over him. He felt a sense of primordial fear, followed closely by a sense of longing. Those eyes were not only a gate to the endless abyss, they were windows to the promised land. The world where Monarchy was considered the middle point of cultivation. Where nigh-eternal Autarchs erected divine domains for their followers to gain insights into the Dao.

Where the latent will of the Primo connected the mortal realms with the Heavens themselves.

“We apologize for the impudence,” Havan said as he took out **[Trailblazer]**, the ancient Spirit Tool they’d found in a Trove two hundred years ago. “For our dreams, we must sin. Your death has the power to transform our fates.”

“Many have tried to steal my fate,” Arcaz grunted as he stood, the collisions of the chains connected to his coffin

reverberating through the valley. “None have succeeded so far.”

There was nothing else to be said. They made their move. Centuries of fighting together allowed them to work in perfect harmony. Fathela became the eye of a poisonous storm as he activated his [**Shroud of Azuza**] while Havan’s sword domain spread to cover half the valley. As for Kurtz, he conjured the four markers of [**Mindworld**], superimposing his restrictive domain on top of Havan’s offensive one.

However, Kurtz barely had time to recognize something was wrong before Arcaz Black appeared before him. Primal fear returned, surging through his veins as a terrifyingly condensed aura was released from the Draugr Lord. But hundreds of near-death experiences had honed Kurtz’s reaction. The moment the young lord appeared, Kurtz was already phasing three hundred meters away with [**Voidgate**].

Fathela and Havan didn’t run from their target, pushing the advance as Kurtz sent out eighteen array clones from his body, each indistinguishable from his real self on the surface. The clones barely had the chance to move away from his position before a massive construction sprang up around them.

Gates, walls, and Miasmatic towers. There was even a restrictive rune in the sky that made Kurtz sink toward the surface. This was a proper fortress. Kurtz frowned as he looked around at the intricate detail of the skill. A true Peak skill, not something that people in Twilight Harbor would have access to. It was a testament to the difference of heritage between them and this young lord.

‘Don’t panic. We knew about this skill from the beacon,’ Fathela’s voice exhorted through the mental link. ‘It should still be unevolved, from the looks of it.’

Kurtz agreed as he took in the skill. The restrictive rune over their heads was exquisite, but it ultimately lacked the spirituality of an E-grade skill. It would probably be able to put even Middle E-grade warriors under pressure, but it was just a minor inconvenience to them.

Four spectral chains shot out of the ramparts. Kurtz simply had them disoriented and shuttling back and forth in search of the true target. In an instant he'd managed to lure twelve of the chains, lessening the pressure on the two frontline fighters by a large degree.

However, he barely had time to set things up before a Miasmic haze followed by a cascading wave of darkness spread out, filling the whole cage. Next, a Dao Field put them under far greater pressure than the restrictive rune, and it was only partly countered by their own auras.

Had their guesses been wrong? The pressure clearly surpassed that of a Peak Fragment, yet it wasn't at the level of a Dao Branch. A braided domain? Was such a thing even possible?

The Dao Field put them under pressure, but the pervasive darkness was even more troublesome. It was a corrosive shroud just like Fathela's **[Shroud of Azuza]** and a constant strain to deal with. He kept the shroud at bay by activating **[Soulwall]**, prompting a barrier wrought from Miasma and mental energy to appear around him. The drain keeping the skill active was pretty high, but definitely manageable.

An eruption of force caused the ground to shake—Havan had launched his opening salvo. He and the Draugr Lord stood locked in place as the aquamarine edge from Havan's **[Swordwail]** was locked in place by a massive jagged edge. The lordling actually used a skill like **[Gorehew]**?

Such was far differed in quality from the other exquisite skills Kurtz had seen so far. It really looked like the trial had arrived a bit early for the young lord. Some of his skills were clearly unevolved. He must have chosen to buy some temporary skills from a local repository instead of rushing his cultivation.

Fathela was already shooting forward, a lance of putrefaction gathering on his hand. Kurtz focused his mind and activated **[Mindworld]**, trying to drag the young Draugr into a realm of delusions. However, his mental energy may as

well have been dropped into a vast ocean when he tried to find the man's consciousness.

Was this some odd mental skill? No! It had to be some unique soul-tempering method. Kurtz infused more energy into the skill, digging deeper toward the recesses of the man's mind. He soon found himself at an impasse. The weird ocean had already robbed his skill of most of the momentum, and he came upon a vast net. It felt like the fractal net stretched from horizon to horizon, vast and free of blemish.

Peak-tier E-grade mental defense.

'His mental resilience is too great,' Kurtz swore through their mental link. 'I won't be able to force him into my mind world in short order.'

'Switch to harassment if mind-bending fails,' Havan said as he applied more pressure.

Fathela reacted instantaneously, changing his goal from killing to maiming. It was lucky, as it looked like the Draugr was completely impervious to the illusions he was assailed with. Two chains pierced for Fathela with pinpoint precision, the Draugr suddenly exploding with power, shrugging off Havan with pure force alone.

Kurtz was shocked by the display of force, knowing Havan's effective Strength was over 17,000 if including his cultivation manual. Just how strong was Arcaz Black to completely overpower him like that?

Kurtz was about to help when his defensive barriers became covered in blue flames. A great sense of danger forced him to swap positions with an array clone. It was just in time, as a wraith had appeared from the darkness, cutting straight through the substitute with a ruthless swing.

He didn't even have a chance to restart his attempt to assist his companions before the chains shot toward him with unerring accuracy, completely ignoring the clones. A lance of poison appeared out of a black shroud, and Kurtz instinctively activated his life-saving talisman.

The lance was clearly Fathela's [**Misery's Edge**], one of his strongest skills. Why was Fathela attacking him? Had he made a deal with the Draugr? Kurtz's thoughts were thrown into disarray, but the spear full of pestilence dissipated before it could reach the thick barrier.

'He displaced my skill somehow!' Fathela exclaimed in Kurtz's mind, and he nodded in understanding.

Meanwhile, Havan was taking the brunt of the damage. Arcaz Black was completely brutalizing him with his axe. He only used two of his chains for support, leaving others to constantly harass Fathela, who'd also been forced to take out over ten wraiths, which kept popping up to attack Kurtz's clones.

Three grisly wounds covered Havan's body, yet Kurtz found himself unable to provide any real help. Any time he tried to form a sigil in his mind or activate his more powerful skills, something interrupted him. It felt like he was being suffocated by those infernal chains, even though he hadn't been caught.

'He's too powerful. Drink the elixir!' Havan exclaimed as he threw out a handful of ancient talismans, causing a massive eruption of rapidly spreading ice.

Havan scrambled to create some distance while he downed his vial, and both Kurtz and Fathela followed suit.

It was a concoction made by the Technocrat Thaumaturges, and therefore considered banned contraband. But this was no time to worry about such things. Kurtz's body burned as his mind exploded with power. He would be bedridden for a month after this. A worthwhile consequence so long as they managed to take this guy out.

However, just as their auras grew, so did the Draugr. Not only in aura, even his physique. A shield had appeared in his free hand while thick, black armor covered his five-meter body. He looked like a true juggernaut. Kurtz's perception bent a bit as the dark knight crushed the restrictive ice.

Three of his doppelgangers were ripped apart. Kurtz didn't care, his mind too filled with bloodlust.

The world turned fuzzy as an eruption of mental energy pushed both chains and wraiths away. Kurtz savored the feeling of power as the **[Whisperer of the Depths]** was finally allowed to activate, and a twenty-meter avatar appeared behind him. Each of his twenty hands formed a sigil of purification, and the intricate fractal in the sky broke apart and was replaced by the Sigil of the Depths.

Fathela also grew to his ultimate form, a five-meter reaper whose dripping toxins were so powerful that space itself corroded, while Havan looked like an apostle of a sword saint as four black wings appeared on his back. The Draugr Lord had firmly taken command of the tempo since the beginning, but he finally found himself greatly restrained by the supremely powerful suppression of **[Whisperer of the Depths]**.

He had been pushed down to his knees as his hand moved toward his head, no doubt assailed by an endless number of illusions. Except the Draugr displayed a shocking resilience as he started to push himself back to his feet, and Kurtz felt his grip steadily weakening. Just how strong was this man's willpower?

'He... breaking through,' Kurtz exhorted through the mental link, his mind sluggish from the taboo brew.

Thankfully, both Fathela and Havan understood his meaning, and the whole valley shook as they unleashed their power to the fullest, taking advantage of the rapidly closing window of opportunity. They shot toward Arcaz in a deathly pincer attack.

A sense of wrongness filled Kurtz's heart, sensing a terrifying aura erupt from the Draugr's body.

It was death beyond death, destruction of utmost finality, a phenomenon which had no place in an E-grade trial. Cracks appeared in the helmet of the hulking Draugr as waves of primal destruction emanated from his body. The courage

gained from the berserking concoction was instantly quenched, but they all knew they couldn't stop at this juncture.

This was the key to Hegemony, the final crossroads that would decide their fate. Ascension or death.

Pestilence converged with Judgment, and it looked like the Draugr feared pestilence the most. Every single chain moved to bind the incoming reaper. Such a measure wouldn't hold Fathela for long in his current state. However, his eyes widened in horror as the Draugr narrowly avoided the spear of poison as he slammed a small sphere into Fathela's chest.

A series of barriers appeared behind the Draugr at the same time as the chains moved to intercept. Havan destroyed them all to deliver an attack filled with all the force he could muster. Kurtz saw how the terrifying sword's radiance created a rift in space itself, though his eyes were trained on Fathela—rather, the large space of nothingness where his chest should be.

He was gone, irrevocably so. Kurtz could sense the destruction of a soul all the way from here. Even his own mind had been damaged from gazing upon that thing. Even odder, he felt his memories fragment and fall apart, slipping through his fingers to never be seen again.

One of them had fallen, and they hadn't accomplished the task. Havan's attack was powerful enough to slay a Half-Step Hegemon, but that didn't help when the strike missed. The Draugr managed to delay the strike just long enough with his barriers to move out of the way, his right leg dodging the strike with only a centimeter to spare.

Havan reacted instantaneously and stabbed **[Trailblazer]** into the Draugr's chest with a lightning-quick jab. That should have been the end.

Kurtz felt like he'd gone mad when the sword embedded in the Draugr's body turned into black ichor. A Spirit Tool had simply disappeared. Maybe even turned into something else.

How was that possible?

Kurtz couldn't comprehend what was going on. Havan looked even more shellshocked after having his old companion vanish like that. The water churned, and Kurtz was beset with grief upon realizing he was the last one standing of his squad. He turned to run, unsurprised to find the young lord appearing right in front of him.

There hadn't even been the slightest energy fluctuation when the Draugr teleported, though Kurtz didn't care about that mystery. The Draugr lordling clearly had an array of terrifying means that frontier cultivators couldn't comprehend. They should have known better.

Greed makes fools out of men.

Kurtz smiled with a mix of desolation and release as the darkness welcomed him.

PROFITEERING

Zac grunted at the deep wound in his chest and swallowed one of the Dawn series healing pills along with a soldier pill. A large ball of hard-to-expel Dao was lodged in the wound, but there wasn't much he could do about it at the moment. It was time to go. He turned his gaze inward toward the brand, and with a push of Dao, he completed his preparations and crushed it in one fell swoop.

Seven days had passed since he was branded, and he'd been attacked eleven times. Two of those ambushes Zac had escaped from, four groups had been relieved of their Spatial Treasures before being knocked out and hidden a few meters beneath the soil, and five battles ended with unilateral annihilation.

He'd made a fortune looting Cosmos Sacks, including everything from rare herbs to a small mountain of Twilight Fruits. There was, unfortunately, no treasure at the same grade as the Life-Death Pearls. He'd still formed three mountains of assorted loot. Even if he didn't manage to unlock the manuals, the accumulated value had to be around twenty to thirty D-grade Nexus Coins.

That wasn't really much to the current him, but he couldn't turn his nose away from making money like this. He was burning his "inheritance" left and right, without any proper channels to recuperate what he spent. Every little thing counted.

The real gain had been the impeccable progress on his combat stance. It was rapidly evolving into something real.

Where he could already incorporate most of his skills without missing a beat. In contrast, his Evolutionary Stance was still only a basic technique that didn't make use of any of his skills.

His contribution points and ladder position had made a significant jump as well, though most of it came from gaining twenty-five thousand points for evolving his death-attuned Dao Fragment. With his other sources of points, he already surpassed most cultivators who entered with a Dao Branch and only got the fifty thousand points to start off with.

[Arcaz Black – Contribution: 81,167 Rank: 2,541. Value: 500–750.]

His points were a bit inflated because of the mothertree and the other two locations he'd helped destroy, but it honestly wasn't empty strength any longer. Zac was still far from the top-tier powerhouses, but he was confident he could soundly defeat anyone without a Dao Branch by this point.

He even felt like Yanub Mettleleaf was no longer an insurmountable enemy, as long as they met in the deeper parts of the Mystic Realm. After all, he'd evolved both Coffin and Axe since they fought, which should make it a lot easier to deal with his powerful regeneration.

More than anything, the ladder showed just how hard it was to form Dao Branches in the E-grade. Catheya had already said it required not only extraordinary affinity, but also valuable opportunities. The point was now starting to come across. Eleven million, most of them the best of the best in Twilight Harbor, yet there were probably less than ten thousand people inside the trial with a Dao Branch.

It was clear taking that step was exponentially harder compared to forming a Dao Fragment in the E-grade. Seeing such a grim situation, he was once more pretty happy with his weird constitution. The bottlenecks were starting to grow more and more palpable for those around him.

Forming a Cultivator's Core without the stability provided by a Dao Branch was extremely difficult. The ladder was a poignant reminder of just how few of the trial-takers would ever reach Hegemony. Meanwhile, he only needed to make

sure he had enough treasures to eat and enough enemies to fight to keep progressing.

After testing things out over the past days, he confirmed the lethality of **[Deathmark]** had taken a huge step forward from the Dao upgrade. The passive shroud alone was dangerous to the average Peak E-grade cultivators, and it was almost game over if they were branded by a mark.

The amount of putrefaction that flooded into their bodies was simply too overwhelming, which was only compounded by the Twilight Energy already messing with people's constitutions.

Better yet, Zac hadn't met a single cultivator who managed to erase the brand within three seconds, which was a lot of time to be subject to the extremely potent toxins. He'd also gotten a lot more adept at instructing his wraiths to better integrate them with his Inexorable Stance. They were a bit simpleminded, but it would probably get better as soon as he managed to upgrade the skill.

Skill evolutions eluded him, but felt he should be getting close based on his experience with **[Blighted Cut]**.

However, even with his recent power-ups, the last four battles had been pretty rough. Two of them he immediately fled from upon seeing the strength of the party, though he'd left them with a small parting gift—a hundred offensive talismans flung in their direction. Activating them all cost almost three-quarters of his Miasma, but the eruption had been a sight to behold.

The party that attacked him twelve hours ago had been pretty impressive as well. Four cultivators from the Yon'Dai Family, one of the thirteen factions on the Twilight Council. They'd been at a power level that surpassed his own, possessing both E-grade skills and a War Array to empower each other.

If not for the advantage he was given by the Twilight Energy, he would have been in big trouble against that quartet. He was forced to use up all three of his Healing Brands mid-battle, along with most of his Void Energy from **[Force of the**

Void]. Thankfully, the void beast organ allowed him to recover the hidden energy storage within a few hours.

Things had obviously gotten even more pressed in the last battle. The trio of Revenants had been decent opponents, and Zac had only planned on robbing them after continuing the duel for a while longer. However, things had changed for two reasons. First, that brew which pushed their strength to a level that surpassed his own while also shaking off most of the effect of the Twilight Energy.

There was no room to hold back in a situation like that.

Secondly, his hidden advance array warned him that a large group was approaching the valley. Perhaps even one of the two armies he'd already escaped from once. He was forced to go all out, using the energy from both his Remnants in short succession. One of the methods had even been something he thought up on the spot.

Warning bells had gone off the moment the sword entered his body, and that storm of chaotic energy would have ripped his innards to pieces unless he did something. Instinctively, he forced the Creation Energy into the sword, not even bothering with having some specific goal in mind. Zac sensed the insipient Tool Spirit being drowned in Creation, falling apart along with the weapon itself.

The cost of that attack had been steep, and he'd once again lost some of his longevity.

It looked like the only safe way for him to use the Creation Energy was in the Origin Mark. Anything else would drain him of his life force. No matter if it was to heal himself or unleash bursts of wild Creation. It was maybe lucky he hadn't really found any way to use the hidden Oblivion Energy in his soul. Perhaps it had a similarly sinister price to be activated freely.

There was at least some good news. It was the first time he'd used Annihilation Sphere for real since he evolved his soul, pretty much confirming what he'd sensed when he was cornered by that Corpselord Hegemon after the auction. His control over the process had improved considerably thanks to

his empowered mental energy. Forming the sphere wasn't really a matter of chance any longer, and he didn't feel he was at risk of accidentally annihilating a body part or two unless something unexpected happened.

He was also able to control the amount of stored Oblivion Energy he expelled, though there seemed to be a minimum amount of energy required to reach a critical mass and form an Annihilation Sphere. He'd lost roughly a third of his stores, but he didn't feel too bad about it. He would have needed to expel some of the energy soon enough anyway to alleviate the mental corruption that came with keeping it all inside.

The gains were plenty, but his time lingering was up. The next group would arrive in less than ten minutes, and Zac had no plans to stay around when they did. Miasma surged through his body as he started channeling [**Abyssal Phase**], and he flew into the thin crack he'd previously discovered. A series of loud explosions erupted behind him as the talismans he had triggered blew half the valley to kingdom come.

That chaotic eruption should mask any lingering energies from his fight, while also making it impossible to figure out where he'd gone. Half a minute later, he'd passed through half a mountain peak, at which point he stopped and returned to his corporeal form. Zac scanned for threats before he activated his Specialty Core as the robes on his body changed their design to suit his human side.

Color returned to his eyes and face a few seconds later, and he took off his shoes before he set off, following the current toward what he hoped was the outer parts of the mountain range.

There was no way to know whether he'd missed something, but he felt he had covered all his bases. His signal should have disappeared in that valley, and he was now tens of thousands of meters away, now appearing human. Even if anyone encountered him, they shouldn't be able to tell he and Arcaz Black were one and the same.

Clattering echoed in the distance, and Zac cracked his neck as he took out [**Verun's Bite**]. It was time to go at it as a

human for a while. After all, he couldn't simply let the insights he'd gained back in the Big Axe Coliseum fade away while he focused on other aspects of his cultivation.

His vision was suddenly blocked as a large, two-meter critter appeared out of nowhere. It was a Hollowtongue, the beast after which the mountains were named. A stinger shot straight for Zac's heart, but he was already on the move as **[Verun's Bite]** ripped through the water.

Zac pivoted his body before he pounced with his axe, almost like a beast biting down on his target. Green blood spread through the water as the axe embedded itself in the odd critter's head, and a burning pain radiated in his left shoulder. He'd underestimated just how agile that tongue was, and failed to completely avoid it as he went in for the kill.

A fiery tsunami of supercondensed Twilight Energy flooded his veins, and the sensation almost made him see double. Zac had already activated **[Innate Ward]**, but it was no use now that the stinger had pierced his skin. It did, however, block out the blood that spread around him, which by itself seemed highly toxic.

His veins constricted and Fragment of the Bodhi came to the rescue, bringing waves of warmth through his body. The toxin was weakened, at which point **[Void Heart]** pounced. **[Purity of the Void]** helped against poisons to some degree, but it was already dealing with pill toxins and the Twilight Energy itself.

A moment later, the situation was back under control except for a red bump where the stinger struck.

The pain was far from lethal, but the blood spreading through the tunnel might attract trouble. He pushed his body down to the floor of the tunnel and flashed away with **[Loamwalker]**, appearing a few hundred meters away. It was a weakness of his movement skill in the water. He actually had to touch the ground to activate it.

He could still do his double-jump in the middle of water though, but it would have to be preceded by a normal step on the ocean bed.

The clattering sounds grew ever louder as he continued, and Zac knew he had chanced upon a hive. Sure enough, he encountered one Hollowtongue after another until he reached the mouth of a large submerged cavern. It was as big as a lake, and there were hundreds of Hollowtongues swimming about or resting on the cave walls and stalagmites.

Zac took in the scene for a few seconds, considering what to do next. Most of the beasts didn't provide any contribution points, but there was one that did: a five-meter mutated version that was given a wide berth by the others. It radiated a powerful aura, far beyond the normal Late-stage Hollowtongue. It had to hold a Late Dao Fragment at least since it was worth 183 contribution points.

While the points were a welcome addition, Zac was more interested in the challenge. A den full of Peak E-grade beasts and a powerful alpha seemed like a good place to continue forging his path. He'd made good strides on his Inexorable Stance, and now it was time to start consolidating his Evolutionary Stance.

Zac estimated it would take between forty to sixty days to reach the edge of the Twilight Chasm after he exited this mountain range, and he hoped to have shored up his skills before reaching that point. This place made a great starting point. Zac preemptively swallowed an antidote pill before he shot into the den.

An hour later, he left the subterranean lake covered in scars and pumped full of dangerous amounts of Twilight Energy. Above his head was a small cloud of energy he'd been forced to release after killing all those critters. The battles over the past days were more than enough to push his next node to the precipice of breaking open, at which point he'd started to release all the energy instead of aiming for another level.

Forcing open a node just a few days after opening five felt a bit too foolhardy, even for him.

Zac made his way through the underground tunnels, following the general direction of one of his compasses, this

one an upgraded version he'd looted two days ago. It was time to leave the Hollowtongue Mountains.

Leaving such a wake of death and destruction behind filled him with mixed emotions, but this was ultimately how the road to supremacy looked. If he ever wanted a shot at catching up to Leandra, he needed to be ruthless, both against himself and others. At least he'd only targeted the same kind of groups: people who were ready to hunt down others for their loot.

Perhaps he had even left the Hollowtongue Mountains safer by eradicating these squads for those who just wanted to search for treasures in peace. Zac knew that he was ultimately just making excuses for himself, but he believed it was fine as long as his Dao Heart was clear as he walked his path.

You've got to do what you've got to do to stay sane in the Multiverse.

Zac emerged from the cave and set out toward what should be the outlet of the mountain range on the opposite side of where he entered. He had slowly made his way across the Hollowtongue Mountains between his fights during the past week, and estimated he should be able to leave within half a day.

However, he felt a presence far ahead, prompting him to stop in his tracks.

It was a squad of eight people, which would be a chore to take out. The good news was, they made no move toward him and had clearly exposed themselves intentionally.

"Excuse us!" one of the men shouted. Zac frowned as he took out an escape talisman just in case.

"Please, wait! We mean you no harm! We're looking for a Draugr imperial named Arcaz Black," the first man said with a small bow, which made Zac take a second look at the group with confusion. "We are paying well for information and assistance!"

Zac blankly looked at the group for a few seconds before he waved the leader over with a crooked smile. Why let an

opportunity to make both connections and some money slip through his fingers?

And who knew more about Arcaz Black's activities than he did?

INFORMATION EXCHANGE

The group of cultivators was too far away for their bounties to show up, but Zac saw the leader's bounty as he got closer: 250–500. That was essentially the average of those who managed to reach the Hollowtongue Mountains, making the members of the group foot soldiers.

The man hesitated when he saw Zac's own value, approaching a bit farther before he stopped.

"You're looking for that crazy Draugr?" Zac asked skeptically. "Sounds like a good way to get yourselves killed."

"We dare not target him ourselves. Many have already fallen; we know that. We're simply looking for him on the orders of Auride Serveris of the Radiant Temple," the leader explained.

"Oh?" Zac exclaimed curiously, remembering one of the fights he'd fled from in the past week.

He had stumbled upon a group of over twenty cultivators, four of whom wore robes that seemed to be related to the Radiant Temple. One of the warriors emitted a very intense aura, and had a massive two-handed sword circling his head.

The small army hadn't actually made a move on him, but Zac didn't dare take any chances due to the number of people and the strength of their leaders. He'd chucked one of his premade talisman balls to set a whole valley on fire while he fled with **[Abyssal Phase]**. Now it looked like that man was looking for revenge.

“He is currently at the 1,533rd spot in the trial, a future powerhouse of the Temple. He is paying handsomely for both clues and tracking marks,” the leader continued when Zac didn’t immediately speak up.

That rank represented real strength, even if it might not sound too impressive compared to the Rankers. It was noticeably higher than his own, and Zac had definitely sensed a powerful weapon-related Dao emanating from that leader’s body, which made sense considering the massive sword.

“I got two of those crystals and some secondhand information,” Zac said. “What is the young lord willing to pay for that? I’m only interested in treasures and Twilight Fruits.”

“Ten Twilight Fruits per crystal,” the man said.

“Even if the signal’s gone out?” Zac asked with a raised brow.

“We don’t know what the young master is planning,” the cultivator shrugged. “We can pay five for secondhand information if it’s useful.”

“I got close to the signal three days ago to see if an opportunity would present itself.” Zac sighed. “But a massive explosion erupted. Judging by the energy signatures, he might be an Array Master who’d set up a trap. The force was much too strong for it to be an attack. Just half a minute after the explosion, the man was over ten thousand meters away. I guess he has High-quality escape talismans to move that quickly in the mountains. If you want to trap him, you need to do something to block those kinds of arrays.”

The man’s face got a bit weird when Zac described the event where his leader had been blasted to kingdom come, but he slowly nodded along. He took out a normal jute sack and filled it with twenty-five Twilight Fruits. Zac in turn threw over two of the crystals he’d snatched in the past days, somewhat regretting he couldn’t divulge he actually had sixteen of them.

The two groups left in their own directions, with Zac heading toward the outer reaches of the mountains. The

twenty-five Twilight Fruits was a nice enough bonus, though just a fraction of the almost six hundred he'd robbed over the past days. What was more important was the information he got out of the trade: the Radiant Temple leader had some method to track him.

Zac repeatedly scanned his body with [**Spiritual Anchor**] over the next ten minutes. There was really nothing left behind. His second-best guess was that the sword cultivator had a way to reverse-engineer the Revenge Array so one of the tracking crystals could instead track the other crystals. If that was the case, his location would be lit up considering how many he carried.

It didn't hurt to be careful, so Zac took a circuitous route over the next few hours and dumped one crystal after another into various powerful currents, allowing them to be dragged back into the depths of the mountain range. With that dealt with, he washed his hands of the whole situation. Something was brewing in the Hollowtongue Mountains, and he wanted no part of it.

He kept going through the winding paths for another two days, at which point he finally reached the exit. The towering peaks were replaced with jagged boulders, which in turn were replaced by a mostly flat seabed covered with corals and seagrass.

Zac didn't encounter anything of interest over the next week, except the occasional plant he found with the help of [**Forester's Constitution**]. It was obvious he was moving through the same paths others had traveled before him to the inner layer of the trial. Any of the real treasures in this area, if there ever were any, had long been harvested.

Eventually, the topography started to change, and Zac found the ocean depths gradually decreasing until it was just a few hundred meters. At the same time, the ambient energy was steadily increasing, and Zac spotted a vast forest in the distance. The trees weren't of as grotesque proportions as the Cork Trees over at Cork Island, but they more than made up for it in number.

The forest line stretched across the horizon, blocking his whole field of vision, as they reached from the ocean floor all the way above the surface. Zac didn't immediately enter. He first took out his missives, trying to figure out which forest he was dealing with. There were over a dozen sprawling forests in the Twilight Ocean, and a few would be dangerous to enter even for him.

Some were the homes to massive schools of fish or other beasts, and the hordes were so numerous, he'd find himself harried to death if he wasn't careful. There wasn't much to go by though, and Zac found himself at an impasse where he wasn't sure whether he was better off passing straight through to save time or to spend a week or two going around.

Suddenly, a lone figure emerged from the forest line some distance off, swimming straight for him. It was clearly a cultivator rather than a local beast. Zac watched with a small frown that relaxed when she stopped over a thousand meters away from him. The woman sent out a crystal, and it sped through the water toward him. Zac looked at it suspiciously, considering whether he should destroy it or not, until he realized what it was and accepted it.

"Are you interested in a trade?" the unknown cultivator asked through the communication crystal.

"A trade for what?" Zac asked curiously.

"Judging from your trajectory, I think you took the Life Pulse on the way here, and we could both benefit from updating our mappers," she said. "I have also traded and killed until my **[Ocean Chart]** has reached 2.33% completion. I've also traveled in the outskirts of this forest for a while, and I have valuable information."

Zac gave it some thought and agreed. There was a small risk of giving up good information and getting false information in return, but the mappers were smart enough to differentiate between firsthand accounts and bought information.

"I can do that. My map is 2.46%," Zac answered as he engraved a copy on one of his spare mappers.

Of course, this copy was slightly altered to not make his path in the Hollowtongue Mountains completely clear. It also didn't display the location of the valley with the Life-Death Pearls nor the disjointed external data containing the volcano and its surrounding features.

The stranger did the same, and Zac smiled with satisfaction when his mapper almost doubled. This cultivator had followed another current here and traveled roughly two weeks through the edge of the forest before she reached this place. Part of it covered the Life Pulse, and Zac guessed she'd traded with someone taking a similar route as himself.

He scanned the contents, and sighed slightly after seeing none of the spots that held the Remnants were marked down. He'd handed over the task of finding the spots to Catheya, but it would obviously be even better if he managed to find them himself.

"Is there anything of note happening where you came from?" the voice asked.

"The mothertree on Cork Island fell just after I got there, even with Yanub Mettleleaf trying to stop it. It was a real mess," Zac said. "The undead were involved, I think. There was also a manhunt for some Draugr called Arcaz Black back in the Hollowtongue Mountains where I just came from, led by the Radiant Temple. The guy is apparently filthy rich, but he survived for a week before disappearing."

Zac had already started using his own exploits to make some money and saw no reason to stop now. Besides, he'd been pretty isolated so far and didn't have much else to contribute.

"There were unusual clashes along the Silverwind Stream as well," the woman said with a sigh. "A squad of elites from the Havarok Empire annihilated a mysterious unit of wandering cultivators. Those cultivators were unknown, but they displayed shocking power. The grandson of a Havarok Marquis actually fell."

"Do you know what they were fighting about?" Zac asked.

“It was at the second major stop of the Silverwind Stream, the Gem Grotto. It sounded like the wandering cultivators tried to blow the whole thing up for some reason,” the woman said. “The empires are up to something; best to stay out of their way.”

The Gem Grotto was a somewhat popular destination for the lower-tier cultivators, and it was a bit like the Divine Grotto he’d contaminated. It was essentially a Nexus Crystal mine like his own mine back home, except it was full of Twilight Crystals. While those crystals were pretty useless for cultivators, they turned into either Miasma Crystals or Divine Crystals when taken out, making the cave a steady, although limited, source of wealth.

Destroying the whole cave truly made no good sense. It was like setting a mountain of money on fire. The purpose had to be related to his own mission, proving once more he was just one of many squads involved in this mess. At least he wouldn’t be involved any longer as soon as he rid himself of that weird egg.

“Which forest is this?” Zac asked next.

“It should be the Greengrove Archipelago,” the woman said, taking out a four-meter eel from her Spatial Ring. “This is likely a Greengrove Eel I caught inside this forest. The appearance of the canopies above the surface matches as well.”

They shared information for a few minutes, but there was ultimately only so much to cover. Both were going at it alone, which meant they could only keep to the edge of the big events and more dangerous spots.

“Your map was superior, so I’ll give you an additional piece of information. There’s a temporary settlement on top of one of the canopies roughly two days from here. I never dared enter myself, but I watched it from a distance for half a day. People did both come and go, apparently without issue,” the woman said and disappeared a moment later.

Zac was pleasantly surprised at the news. Temporary settlements often appeared in trials like this since it was a

convenient way for the powerhouses to make money. Some top-tier expert would set up shop, using their name and prowess as a guarantee of safety. People could go there to socialize, trade, and exchange intelligence.

However, Zac could also understand why the woman ultimately never entered. There was always a risk of getting robbed or killed when entering such a place, and that risk only increased when you were a lone warrior without any background to rely on. Furthermore, this supposed Dao Trial had a clear slaughter component, which made things even sketchier.

Still, Zac chose to head for the encampment.

One of the main benefits of the camp was the communal maps. Everyone entering would usually have to contribute their own map in addition to an entry fee or at least be able to sell a copy of their mapper. That led to the communal map being the combined effort of dozens, perhaps hundreds, of warriors.

The current goal was to get to the Twilight Chasm as quickly as possible, get rid of the egg and search for treasures before his soul oceans became saturated by the Twilight Energy. The best way to do that was to find one of the streams entering the chasm. It could save a month of travel time, and he'd already looted seven submersibles from his battles in the Hollowtongue Mountains.

Updating the map to a communal one might even add information on the places related to the Remnants.

Zac entered the Greengrove Archipelago, but he didn't even get farther than a hundred meters before he was assaulted by an eel just like the one the woman had showcased. It shot out of a hole in one of the towering trees reaching above the surface.

This was a domain of the beasts, so he already had [Verun's Bite] ready. A swirl of leaves passed among the trees, completely overwhelming the Late E-grade eel. It released a sea of lightning, though Zac's Endurance and

[Innate Ward] was enough to mollify the effect until the beast died.

Zac swore in annoyance when a dozen more eels shoot out from the surrounding trees, probably alerted by the lightning domain. A huge leaf appeared in front of his blade, and it immediately gained a golden luster before a radiant wave flew out, quickly followed by one of pure death.

Life and death formed the signature demarcation of **[Rapturous Divide]**, and Zac's eyes widened in alarm as the scar kept growing. One tree after another toppled as the Twilight Energy in the surroundings was reduced to its base components, pushing the lethality of the skill to unprecedented levels.

The madness only lasted less than a second before the radiant domain of Arcadia was ripped apart by the Twilight Energy, cutting the skill short. Still, that was more than enough, as all the eels had been split before they even had a chance to unleash their domain or move out of the way.

The same was true for the trees, where many had lost a twenty-meter section of their trunks. However, they still hovered in the air, as though they didn't need their roots to survive. It was just because of their canopies above the surface, pushed together so densely, they essentially formed proper islands made out of leaves. The trees that weren't cut apart propped up those that were.

Zac looted the battlefield before he moved on. It was lucky he'd decided to test out the skill before using it in a real battle. Its effect was definitely strong, but worked a bit differently compared to normal thanks to the Twilight Energy. It was more chaotic, with hundreds of demarcations forming a thick band of destruction instead of one clean line.

The lethality was pretty impressive, except it was also ripped apart by the surroundings. If someone managed to defend for just half a second, the attack would be rendered useless by the Twilight Ocean.

It was a worthy trade in Zac's opinion, and he continued to temper himself beneath the Greengrove Archipelago for half a

day, fighting the various beasts that made the water their home. The eels were the largest population. Zac had soon killed hundreds of them, and by this point, it felt like his whole body was electrified.

Zac suddenly felt a pang of danger as a sea of lightning approached, and he hid inside a hollow trunk, activating an illusion array. It first looked like a natural calamity closing in, until he discerned a monstrosity of an eel at the center. It stretched over one hundred meters, and its movements caused crackling sounds that echoed through the forest.

An armor of lightning enshrouded it as well, and it emitted a dense killing intent. Even worse, it looked like it was looking for something. Or someone. Was it angry that its children had been killed over the past day and came to find the culprit?

Zac wasn't in any mood to fight this thing. The big bastard was completely different to the mutated Hollowtongue he'd fought with relative ease the other day. This was definitely a proper Beast King going by the aura, the equivalent of a Hegemon. A rarity, but they definitely existed inside the Twilight Ascent.

They supposedly mainly lived inside the Twilight Chasm, but some kings could appear this deep in the trial. Part of Zac wanted to test his mettle, though this didn't feel like the time or place. This big guy didn't come across as a pushover. And even if he defeated him, who knew what kind of attention it would draw and what aces he would be forced to burn.

Thankfully, the beast didn't discover Zac's hiding spot, and soon left in the direction of Zac's trail of destruction. Zac decided not to stay beneath the surface in case it came back. It was time to head above water after months of traveling on the ocean floor.

VENTUS KALAVAN

Zac swam out of his hideout after making sure the King Eel was gone and swiftly followed the tree trunk until he reached the canopy. It was extremely dense, to the point Zac had to cut a path through the shrubbery, making a thirty-meter tunnel until he reached the other side of the tree crowns.

He left the muted world of the ocean depths behind and was greeted by distant bird cries and a breath of fresh air.

It was a welcome change after having mostly inhaled the weird water of the Twilight Ocean, only occasionally finding a dry cave where the air was stale. Zac looked around, and he had to admit the scene was a bit novel. The sky in the Greengrove Archipelago was completely blocked when looking at it from the ocean floor, but above the surface, there were thousands of islands made by the Greengrove Trees' canopies bunching together.

Meanwhile, the Twilight Ocean formed shallow seas and rivers between the islands, where shoals of small fish swam about. These rivers weren't actually connected to the ocean below, and he would have to cut through the densely bunched leaves to get back. It was a bit weird to know he wasn't standing on land, but rather in a tree crown, as Zac could barely tell the islands weren't natural.

The ground was essentially a solid mix of leaves and soil that had drifted over. Some branches of the Greengrove Trees continued to grow above the "ground," turning into miniature trees of their own that reached a height of around ten meters.

Animal calls came from all directions, mostly those of birds that perhaps used the archipelago as a stopping point while traversing the vast ocean. None of the tree crowns grew more than five or six meters above the water's surface, but Zac guessed the intermittent islands with the massive trunks beneath the surface had a calming effect, acting as natural wave breakers.

The low altitude of the islands made Zac's life easy as well since he instantly spotted a marker a few islands over. It almost looked like an incursion, except it didn't contain any strong presence. There was also a line on top, simply saying "Temporary Settlement." Whoever set this place up had come prepared.

It was no wonder someone decided to put up a temporary settlement in this place. Most people were ultimately more comfortable staying above water, but powerful storms usually raged above the surface, especially this deep into the Mystic Realm. Those storms could be even more lethal than the currents, which was why most simply stayed closer to the ocean bed.

Zac observed the surroundings for over an hour from the cover of his tunnel. There was very little activity. He spotted two groups of cultivators surreptitiously moving toward the beacon, but there were no outbursts of energy indicating battles taking place. Only then did Zac start to make his way forward, swapping between using **[Loamwalker]** through the moats and swimming across the shallow seas.

A few hours later he reached his destination, an unusually large island. It was over five times the normal size of the surrounding islands, and rose almost twenty meters above the surface. The Twilight Energy was denser than normal as well, making Zac wonder why the powerhouse chose such a weird spot to set up camp.

"Welcome, twenty-five Twilight Fruits to enter," a guard said, and Zac's brows rose when he looked at the dozens of people inside.

He'd hoped the entry fee would be in Nexus Coins or Nexus Crystals. That was obviously being too optimistic. There weren't too many people who went this deep into the Mystic Realm, but with people coming and going, the base had to make a few hundred Twilight Fruits a day. Even if it was shared among the workers, that was still a massive haul.

"That much?" Zac couldn't help but ask.

"Well, you can stay up to a week for that price," the guard said with a shrug. "And with the leader's purification array, it's definitely worth it. The chance to expel all the accumulated gunk from your body in return for a few thousand E-grade Nexus Coins?"

"Fine," Zac grunted and handed over the entrance fee, along with a few extra to the guard. "Any tips you have to share?"

He had a few hundred Twilight Fruits left after his rampage in the mountains, even with Alea happily eating any he threw her way. A small bribe to create some goodwill wasn't too expensive in exchange for getting some information.

"Thank you. Only one rule to follow. Don't cause a ruckus and don't exert too much energy. Otherwise, everyone here will attack you," the guard said.

"Why would people attack me just for exerting some energy?" Zac asked.

"Well, this place has a guardian beast." The man grinned. "No one wants you to wake it up."

"What?" Zac said with confusion.

"You saw how big this island is. It's not a coincidence. This town is sitting right on top of the den of a Raksha Shrimp King," the man explained. "Thus the rule about limiting energy outbursts. No one wants to wake the slumbering beast below."

"How is there a Beast King right below us!" Zac exclaimed, keeping his voice low even through the clamor of the town. "That's impossible."

“You can go below if you want to check things out yourself. A few have. But you should know that everyone will attack you if you return with a bunch of shrimp underlings in tow. Better to turn you into an offering than let the beasts come over.”

“That... is something else,” Zac sighed. “The big boss of this place is pretty smart. Who is it?”

“His name is Ventus Kalavan,” the guard said.

“Not a local?” Zac asked with a small frown, not recognizing the name.

“No, but he’s not a stuck-up bastard like some of the imperials. He’s from the Radiant Temple, and he actually seems to have a few invites,” the man said with longing in his eyes.

Zac could understand the man’s desire. Many natives of Twilight Harbor had a complicated relationship with the foreign factions. They partly despised them because of how they came to the Zervereth Sector and robbed it of most of its top-tier cultivation resources. They also dreamed of being discovered, to be taken to the supreme cultivation havens that B-grade factions no doubt possessed. A simple word from this Ventus Kalavan could completely change the trajectory of someone’s life.

Having invites also gave some indication of the standing of this Kalavan guy. Catheya only had one token to the Undead Empire, and that was mostly because of her master. The Radiant Temple was notoriously picky, so having multiple invites meant he must hold significant status among the younger generations.

Still, it made him a bit hesitant hearing there was another Radiant Temple elite in this area, apart from the guy who made his haunt in the Hollowtongue Mountains. Was it a coincidence or was it something more?

“Do you know what ranking the young master has?” Zac asked hesitantly.

“No idea. His contribution value is actually zero, but his strength can’t be too low. There was a raid a week ago, and ten people attacked. They were powerful, but the young master appeared and simply ripped them apart like they were trash.”

Zac nodded in understanding. It was a shame the ladder only appeared once a month and only showed the top one hundred. He wasn’t on the list, so he could be anything from a powerhouse just short of entering the ladder, to someone at rock bottom. Of course, he could also be someone completely uninterested in the trial since his Daos didn’t seem to be related to Life or Death.

He might instead be targeting the Fate-Plucking Ladder considering the entrance fee. It didn’t matter much to Zac. He was in a new persona known to no one at the moment, and the struggles between the big shots were far beyond him. He was more interested in gathering information and updating his **[Ocean Chart]**.

The latter was easy, as there was a building specifically designed for that very purpose, and Zac headed over after saying his thanks to the guard. However, he stopped again after taking a few steps, as over 80% of the Twilight Energy around him was suddenly replaced by Cosmic Energy.

The effect was the same as Catheya’s array, but it appeared to span the whole settlement. This might only be a square, walled compound with temporary structures thrown up, but the cost to purify such a large area had to be pretty extravagant. This Ventus Kalavan was clearly burning massive amounts of Nexus Coins to harvest more Twilight Fruits.

“How do you perform trades here?” Zac asked after entering the store designated to update your mapper.

“We do straight trades of completion for free, with 0.2% margin. You can also buy 1% completion for eight Twilight Fruits. We also sell a complete copy for forty Twilight Fruits.”

“What rate are you currently at?” Zac asked.

“8.84%,” the shopkeeper said with some pride. “Including 1.3% that’s deeper than this current depth. Buying the full

copy is definitely a good deal.”

Zac whistled, actually a bit impressed. It wasn't too different from Zac's own [**Ocean Chart**], which was currently at 3.47% after the trade the other day, but there were only so many routes that led to the Greengrove Archipelago this early in the trial. For them to fill up almost a tenth of the trial in just over four months was no small feat.

As for whether the full price was a good deal or not, Zac wasn't so certain. Part of the completion probably contained the Life Pulse route, along with early sections of the trial that were of no use to Zac.

Still, he wasn't lacking fruits, and he would keep getting more as time passed. Zac ultimately doubted Alea was truly insatiable, just like how Verun only wanted a limited amount of blood from each type of source.

“I'll just take a copy,” Zac muttered and handed over another forty Twilight Fruits. “Your boss must be making money left and right.”

“My granny always said my face would bring great fortune, and I guess it's true.” A smooth and melodic voice emerged from the entrance before Zac had a chance to go over his expanded map. Zac turned around to see a man standing in the entrance.

“Boss!” the attendant hurriedly said as he stood up a bit straighter, which prompted Zac to do a double take.

If the Tal-Eladar were elf-like creatures with jagged teeth and some other bestial features, then Ventus Kalavan looked like a proper high elf. Zac had never seen that kind of species in the Base Town nor while traveling the Zecia Sector, making him believe it was either a regional race or one that wasn't represented in Zecia. After all, while humans were everywhere, many other races were not.

Ventus had half a head over Zac's height, though Zac wouldn't be surprised if the elf only weighed two-thirds of what he did. Zac's whole frame had become a brutish bulk of chiseled muscles, while Ventus was extremely lean in a refined

rather than emaciated way. He didn't give off the aura of a warrior, but rather of a scholar.

That impression was only increased since he was holding a weird instrument, something resembling an abacus. Instead of wooden balls on rods, there were hundreds of small stone beads hovering in an array without anything keeping them in place. It was clearly something valuable, as it emitted an aura that surpassed Zac's own weapons.

It wasn't necessarily higher quality, but was definitely of a higher grade than his own Spirit Tools. The odd appearance of the Spirit Tool and the gentle appearance of the elf wasn't enough for Zac to let his guard down. He'd already heard the warning from the sentry, and his instincts told him this man was extremely powerful. No matter if his appearance and aura were almost that of a noncombat class.

Zac wasn't exactly sure how to deal with the sudden appearance of the big honcho himself, so he simply nodded in his direction as he mentally readied himself for battle just in case.

"Welcome to my little town, my friend," Ventus smiled. "I have been waiting for you. I have a business proposal to offer."

"Waited for me? We don't even know each other," Zac countered, warning sirens blaring in his mind.

"Then I guess we were simply fated." The elf smiled as his fingers grazed a few of the gems on the abacus, prompting them to change their constellation.

"Come visit me when you are ready. It will be very beneficial for you. After all, aren't you right at the precipice?" Ventus said with a wave before he left, leaving a befuddled Zac behind.

Zac tried to understand what was going on as he spied on the elf sauntering back toward the walled-off area in the settlement, with all the resting cultivators scrambling to their feet to greet him. Zac had stayed nondescript since arriving, and his current identity didn't have any interesting points. His

array was currently inactive, but the bracer he got from Greatest should be enough to block any spying at the E-grade.

The situation was definitely suspicious.

“Boss has called a few people over since he set up shop almost two months ago,” the attendant offered when he saw Zac’s inquiring look. “All of them left not long after. The longest stay was two hours. Some sported wounds, but they didn’t look disappointed. A few even had their bounties increase. You can ask anyone here. Many even stay longer than planned in hopes that the boss will call them over.”

Zac hesitated for a few seconds before he nodded and left. The elf had already entered his compound, and Zac didn’t immediately follow. He instead walked through the small settlement, surreptitiously asking one cultivator after another for information in exchange for Nexus Coins. After half an hour, the situation was clear. Either they were all under some sort of spell or the attendant was telling the truth.

In fact, many asked those who left the compound what happened, and it turned out the elf was looking for suitable sparring partners and had supposedly built a sparring cage that was powered by Dao Treasures. Most tried to stall as long as possible so they could benefit as much as possible from the insanely exorbitant setup, but most fights only lasted a moment before they failed to keep up with the boss.

A few had actually managed to last long enough to reach a breakthrough of their own. Of course, some were also dreaming of being discovered by showcasing their skills during the sparring session.

The offer was certainly a tantalizing one. After mulling it over, Zac headed for the walled-off section. He’d fallen just short of evolving his Fragment of the Bodhi before, and this seemed like a good opportunity. If this didn’t work, he could always find a Beast King to pit his life against. A sparring session here would even allow him to save on his own Dao Treasures and keep them for a rainy day.

Sparring with an elite from a B-grade faction would definitely be beneficial to his combat style as well. How was

his Evolutionary Stance supposed to evolve if he didn't seek out various powerful opponents? Still, he mentally prepared for a prison break in case the scion's intentions weren't quite as pure as advertised.

The gates to the mansion swung open upon Zac's approach and closed after he entered. The interior was a large garden, and Zac looked around with some confusion, realizing none of the plants were spiritual in nature. Was the elf simply walking around with a pouch full of soil and flowers for situations like these?

"Oh, you're finally here," Ventus said as he looked up from a book he was reading.

"You could have saved me some trouble if you'd simply explained yourself," Zac grunted as he scanned the area for hidden traps as best he could.

"No need to be so tense," Ventus laughed. "I have no designs on your life. You've seen my bounty. The amount of slaughter and destruction I would have to unleash to even gain a top ten thousand spot would be shocking. And all that effort would just result in a Limited Title worse than the ones I already have. What's the point?"

"So why even come here?" Zac probed.

"Orders from above; can't go into detail. However, my intuition tells me you have an idea of what I'm talking about." Ventus smiled. "The Perennial Vastness Token is a happy surprise though."

"You don't have things like that in the Radiant Temple?" Zac asked, diverting the subject from what he did and didn't know.

"Well, we do have a few similar opportunities, but nothing comes for free. If I can save decades' worth of Temple Points by snatching this opportunity for myself, I can use the points on unique treasures or other good stuff instead." Ventus shrugged. "So, are you ready to spar? Let's help each other across the threshold."

ORDER

The elf was gearing up for a sparring session that would push them to reach a breakthrough. However, Zac had some reservations even if the opportunity appeared good.

“Why me?” Zac asked. “If you can’t give me a proper answer, I’ll have to decline.”

That was the most burning question in Zac’s mind. If he was giving off clues about his situation to the young elites of the B-grade empires, he needed to know immediately—or if this elf had somehow found out about some of his most important secrets, the situation might turn into something bigger than a simple spar.

“Can you tell what path I follow?” Ventus asked as a Dao Field spread out from his body.

Zac’s thoughts whirred as he felt the ambient energy, taking in the elf with surprise. It was just a Dao Field from a Peak Fragment as far as Zac could tell, which was decidedly lower than he expected. However, the Dao Field was far more intense than the fields of his own two Peak Fragments. Almost a whole tier higher.

This Ventus must be right at the precipice of forming a Branch. Zac also suspected he had an extremely powerful soul to push the Dao Field to this extent. As for the type of Dao, Zac didn’t have the slightest clue.

It didn’t really feel like a combat-oriented Dao. There was no bloodlust or sharpness, and neither attuned to nature or the elements. It didn’t feel like Adcarkas’ Dao of Space or

Leviala's Dao of Time. There was a mysterious and intangible feeling, but it wasn't the Dao of Karma either.

For some reason, it made Zac think of an old academy with observatories and ancient scrolls filling tables.

"Books...?" Zac said for lack of a better answer.

Ventus smiled. "Well, not quite. My path is within Dao of Numerology, one of the children of the Dao of Order."

Zac's brows rose a bit in surprise. The Dao of Order was a top-tier concept, proven by the simple fact it had birthed a proper Apostate. As for the Dao of Numerology, Zac didn't know a lot about it. He remembered Leviala had mentioned it once, and he'd read short descriptions in missives about Dao.

There was no proper faction in the Zecia Sector following this Dao, and it was apparently as hard to master as the Daos of Space, Time, and Karma.

These Daos put greater demands on affinity for some reason. No wonder this guy managed to become a proper member of the Radiant Temple with this kind of accomplishment. It was probably even harder to form a Peak Fragment subordinate to the Dao of Numerology compared to forming a Dao Branch of a weapon-based Dao.

That didn't mean these Daos were more powerful, though the rarity of a Dao was an advantage of its own. Zac had fought against a lot of Elementalists and weapon masters over the years, and he could trust his instincts against those kinds of warriors. But against the elf in front of him? He was clueless on what to expect in a battle.

"Every day since entering, I have calculated the streams of fate of the Twilight Ascent, and the path gradually grew clearer. I chose this spot specifically to form a settlement, as it rests on a nexus on the way to the Twilight Chasm. A large number of those marked by fate will pass through these gates, and you are one of them," Ventus said with an intense look. "Even better, the presence of the Undead Empire and Havarok Empire in this area is extremely weak, with a low probability

of me running into someone troublesome while collecting Twilight Fruits.”

It was just like Leviala had said. If he was speaking the truth, Ventus Kalavan was essentially a supercomputer that gathered thousands of pieces of information, turning them into data that helped him predict the future and his optimal path. Abbot Everlasting Peace’s Dao had been different, but the end result was similar.

He’d known all sorts of things that hadn’t yet happened through his insights into Karma. For a Peak E-grade cultivator from a B-grade faction to be able to do the same, was unsurprising. Zac’s intuition told him that while the elf hadn’t necessarily explained the whole situation, he also wasn’t lying.

“So how does this work?” Zac asked.

“Come with me,” Ventus said, and they walked over to a tree that twisted to form a tunnel.

They reached an underground chamber with a ceiling height of over ten meters and a diameter of almost a hundred meters. Its walls were made from the densely packed canopy of the Greengrove, and hundreds of banners with inscriptions hung from both ceiling and walls. Zac guessed they were purifying talismans since the Twilight Energy in the area was barely as dense here as at the starting continent.

There were also eight braziers standing by the wall, equidistant from each other. Zac’s eyes roved across the engravings and braziers, looking for any hint of something amiss. Neither his danger sense nor skills found anything wrong with the setup, and his instincts told him this was the kind of preparation you’d see in a cultivation cave.

In fact, there were already Dao Treasures loaded in each of the braziers, and the moment Ventus closed the door, small fires ignited beneath the fruits. An alluring scent spread through the whole place, and the area soon felt like a weakened version of the Dao Chamber where they’d cracked open the Dao Funnel. Part of him wanted to simply sit down and gobble everything up, but he knew that doing so would just harm himself.

He was still lacking that final inspiration of what direction to take his Fragment of the Bodhi. If he let himself get swept up by the mysterious smoke, he might end up with an imperfect Dao that didn't quite match his path. Zac turned toward Ventus, growing uncertain when the smiling elf just stood there with the large wooden frame in his left hand.

“What’s wrong?” Ventus said with a raised brow. “It’s not cheap to run this thing, you know.”

“Uh, are you going to fight with that thing?” Zac asked, indicating the wooden frame and the floating stones within.

“You’ll understand soon enough. Don’t worry, just fight freely.” He laughed. “No skills though. They’re just conduits to the Dao rather than its base, and it might attract the big guy below us.”

“Alright,” Zac said. “You’d better not regret it.”

It looked ludicrous that the elf wanted to defend against **[Verun’s Bite]** with stone beads and a wooden frame, but Zac guessed his reservations were simply him being a country bumpkin. Not wasting any time, Zac shot forward as Ventus flashed to the middle of the chamber with a graceful leap.

Zac launched a probing strike aimed at the elf’s chest, which he effortlessly avoided by shifting his weight with expert precision. At the same time, the elf flicked one of the stones on his Spirit Tool, and Zac felt the universe tilt when hearing the click of the gems colliding.

It wasn’t really a spiritual attack, at least not a type he was familiar with. It reminded him a bit of when he’d fought the Karmic Cultivator in the Tower of Eternity, where the man tried to impact his fate. He didn’t actually feel those kinds of Karmic restraints, but still felt like a beast trapped in a cage for some reason.

Zac swung his axe once again to break free from the mental shackles by putting out some pressure of his own. He also tried to stomp down on the elf’s foot to lock him in place. However, he was surprised to find it was rather his own foot

that had been restrained, with Ventus immobilizing him with a force that belied his thin frame.

Something changed in the weird weapon as the hovering stones lit up like stars. Some rearranged themselves into a constellation resembling an intricately decorated shield. Zac didn't know why he thought so since a few dozen motes of light couldn't depict an image with such clarity. But that was what he saw.

In either case, there was no time for Zac to ponder on the implication of the rearrangement since the elf had moved the abacus to counter Zac's attack. Such a collision would normally result in a broken wooden frame and Zac's enemy thrown across the room or cut apart entirely. But it was like the weird Spirit Tool nullified force.

The collision didn't quite halt Zac's strike, though Ventus managed to exert very little power to diffuse most of Zac's momentum, and he suddenly found himself getting his forehead flicked before the elf distanced himself in a flash.

"You'd better get serious," Ventus laughed. "You're no good to either of us like this."

"Right," Zac muttered, preparing himself.

The most recent exchange had been a bit embarrassing. At least he now knew the elf could take the heat. He shot forward once more, like a beast pouncing on another powerful predator encroaching on his domain. His axe cut a ruthless upward arc aimed at maiming rather than killing, and again the beads collided, restraining him.

Thankfully, the heart of the Evolutionary Stance was change and freedom. Life always finds a way. If one path closed, there would be innumerable other paths to success. Zac fluidly changed his upward swing into a tackle, and Ventus took a few shuffling steps to avoid getting thrown onto the ground.

The elf regained his tempo almost immediately, and launched an offense of his own. Zac was already pushing forward to force the fight into the tempo of his stance, but

almost felt like he'd been gored on a lance when he found a palm slamming into his chest seemingly out of nowhere. The elf looked weak and refined, but he really packed a punch.

Zac estimated Ventus' effective attributes to be around his own. It was equally possible he was restraining himself to match Zac's power. Zac's gut told him they were simply closely matched, which probably meant Ventus possessed a Dao Branch he currently wasn't utilizing. There was no other way he would be able to counter Zac's attributes, as far as Zac was concerned.

Attributes weren't the only source of the effectiveness of the elf's strike though. It was like Ventus found the absolute optimal moment to strike. It hit Zac straight in his solar plexus, and even took advantage of Zac's own momentum. He almost felt like a dumb boar running straight into the raised spear of a hunter, impaling himself on the weapon.

A small setback like that wouldn't stop a beast in the wild, and the gleaming edge of [**Verun's Bite**] ripped through the air in an attempt to cut off the offending hand. Unfortunately, it was like Ventus knew his actions even before Zac did so himself. Zac was following his instincts, and the elf was calculating what those instincts would say in real time, continuously adjusting his response.

The two exchanged a dozen strikes in an instant, where all of Zac's attempts to force open Ventus' nigh-perfect defense were rebuffed, with Zac getting punched by one painful counter after another. He was coming to understand the power of the elf's path. Using precise calculations and predictions to find optimal ways to strike. Meanwhile, the odd Spirit Tool was not only a defensive treasure, but also appeared to help Ventus make those precise calculations.

Zac couldn't think of any direct solution that didn't involve cheating with his skills or bloodline, so he could only redouble his efforts. There should be a limit to either Ventus' calculative abilities or his ability to respond to Zac's unfettered assault. In fact, Zac felt his Inexorable Stance would be pretty effective against this kind of combatant.

So what if you could predict fate if fate was inexorable and unavoidable?

However, Zac's purpose wasn't to win, but to find inspiration. A minute passed, and the speed with which they exchanged strikes kept increasing. They'd turned into a blur flickering across the Dao Chamber, each strike empowered, not by Dao, but their path and convictions. Zac was quickly becoming engrossed by the battle, partly because of the environment and partly because Ventus was an excellent sparring partner.

It felt like he was fighting fate itself with his Evolutionary Stance. Zac's technique was ever-changing and ever-improving, and Ventus remained inexhaustibly prepared no matter what he tried. In fact, the elf's methods were also evolving as Zac's movements became more and more unpredictable. He wasn't just anticipating Zac and countering after a while, but pushing the direction of the fight in inscrutable ways.

Everything from a small shuffling step to moving the stars in the abacus was filled with meaning, meant to change the way Zac reacted. It was extremely powerful on its own. Especially so against someone like Zac, who used an instinctual type of fighting method. It was almost like Zac couldn't trust his instincts, as his own path was being affected by Ventus'.

None of that dampened Zac's enthusiasm. Rather the opposite. Every moment his technique improved, becoming increasingly more complete, until a burgeoning wave of inspiration washed over him. He was literally fighting inside a tree canopy, hidden within a small sanctuary in a dangerous zone.

He was standing inside his own Dao, gradually perfecting his path.

Evolution was endless, ever changing. If his Inexorable Stance represented the ultimate fate of all living things, then the Evolutionary Stance represented the ability to break those chains of fate and the laws of nature themselves.

The smoking haze from the braziers started to transform, turning into two forces in a struggle for supremacy. One was overbearing, like the Heavens themselves towering above all creation. The other was much smaller, frantically fighting against the larger one, constantly eluding being locked down.

Ventus was aiming at becoming the arbiter of fate, an apostle of Order. His actions would be Heavenly Law, dictating providence and the tides of battle. Meanwhile, Zac birthed and discarded one move after another in an endless cycle, each attack a life going from birth to death in the span of a breath. Each unique and unpredictable.

He was becoming an agent of Chaos, infecting fate with an unerasable tinge of uncertainty.

And the motor of it all was Life. Life was the source that kept filling Zac with inspiration, while his weapon was the delivery method. Axe and abacus clashed over and over, as neither Ventus nor Zac was ready to give an inch in this fight representing their paths. It was even becoming unclear whether they were really just sparring or fighting for real as time marched on.

Fists met flesh, the collisions echoing with the truths they both searched for in the heat of battle.

As they became increasingly caught up in the ripples of inspiration, the fight started to transform. An outsider would probably get confused if he spectated, since the strikes gradually became slower rather than faster. It must have looked like they both were running out of steam, but the truth wasn't that simple.

For every move Zac executed, there were ten that were discarded. Both were continuously adjusting from the slightest change in the battlefield, like they were playing chess, thinking dozens of moves ahead. The bringer of this change was largely Zac, as he started to come to a realization.

Life was full of endless possibilities fused in immeasurable efficiency. Excess was a luxury of humans rather than a truth of life. The wolf wouldn't go on a mad slaughter and kill more than it could eat. It would be a waste of energy. Plants and

beasts wouldn't evolve features that served no purpose, since every morsel of energy was needed to survive in the wilds.

Just like how life was efficient, so did Zac need to become more discerning in his combat style. It would still be marked by randomness and unpredictability, he would just need to be in the driver's seat, creating a targeted evolution rather than a series of random events that might or might not end well.

It was important to distinguish between concept and application. In true evolution, most mutations failed, and 99% of all species perished sooner or later. Such an outcome was obviously not acceptable when he was fighting. He couldn't let himself get maimed or killed just because randomness dictated it.

And as he controlled evolution, he was controlling fate. If fate wanted him to perish, he would break through fate and find a way. Zac's attacks gradually became more forceful, no longer trying to trick or subvert Ventus' combat style. His instincts told him to break right through it.

He was already a mortal on the path of cultivation, so what did he fear fighting directly against predestination?

The elf frowned as he suddenly found himself pushed harder than before, and the storms of Dao around him became more and more overbearing. It was to no avail, as Zac fought like a man possessed, pushing with wild abandon. Zac was accumulating one wound after another, but rips and tears started to appear in Ventus' robes.

The elf was unwilling to be pushed around, and the abacus swung toward **[Verun's Bite]** in an effort to steal his momentum. Zac's knee rose with enough force to make the air fracture, and it hit the bottom of the wooden frame with overwhelming might just before the two weapons clashed.

Zac felt strong resistance for an instant before the abacus flew out of the elf's grasp. His whole being surged with momentum, and Zac barely remembered to stop his edge before it sank into the chest of Ventus.

“It’s my vict—” Zac said with burgeoning pride, his proclamation cut short as a hard object slammed into his head.

It was the abacus he’d forced out of Ventus’ hand. It had flown up a couple of meters, the trajectory making it fall right on top of him. The collision caught him completely unaware, and Zac stumbled a few steps back as his vision turned white for a second. He shook his head to clear his mind, and thankfully the elf had no intention of following up on his lucky break.

“Relinquish fate to seize the future,” Ventus muttered, his eyes burning with conviction as he stood rooted in place.

It looked like the elf had found a path of his own, and he scurried to the other side of the chamber and sat down.

Despite being covered in painful bruises, Zac was elated as he walked to the opposite side and sat down. His body was already full of the mystical energy of the Dao Treasures, and it all shot toward the celestial Bodhi in his mind. He’d found it. The direction he wanted to take the Fragment of the Bodhi. And now, he simply needed to form it with the fuel that Ventus provided.

DAO BRANCH

The scorching sun blasted the badlands, and the lone Bodhi was the only island of life in an ocean of death. The punishing rays kept the vast desert in a deathly grip for an eternity, but the sanctified tree was not content with simply enduring. It was the agent of change, the key to life in this lifeless world. Year after year a golden haze would spread from its canopy, small seeds with the power of transformation.

Life was the breaker of barriers that pushed cultivators to pave the road toward eternity. The Heavens had its designs—immutable and intractable—yet unable to stop the innumerable beings of the cosmos from grasping for the great beyond. It staved off death as it filled the living with endless possibilities, allowing all manner of beings to spread across all space.

Eventually, a seed from the Bodhi would manage to take hold, and one tree would turn into two. Two would birth four, and eventually, the badlands would be a desolate desert no longer. A small seed could break the status quo that had gripped the world for a near eternity. When the winds of fate blew, anything could happen.

Zac had already incorporated his Dao with his path, and most of the insights were consolidated after the previous bout of meditation. There was now an added element to the Fragment of the Bodhi, just as with his path: fighting fate. If the death-aspected side of his cultivation represented finality and inexorability, then the life-aspected side represented endless possibilities.

The two concepts were opposing and irreconcilable. A direction Zac still felt was the right way to go. Soon enough, the Fragment took the final step, and he managed to push his final Dao Fragment to Peak mastery. He opened his eyes and activated his Dao Screen, taking a gander at the results.

Fragment of the Bodhi (Peak): All attributes +40, Endurance +550, Vitality +1,110, Intelligence +30, Wisdom +280, Effectiveness of Vitality +20%

The results were in line with his expectations, with the only caveat that the evolution provided a bit more Wisdom and a bit less Endurance than anticipated. That was just fine with him, considering his physical durability was pretty disgusting already. There wasn't much else of interest that had changed, except his ladder position made another jump, this time by three hundred places.

It wasn't too much, though Zac wasn't surprised. The evolution pushed him just past one hundred thousand contribution points, which meant he was most likely competing against those who'd formed a Dao Branch. And who among those warriors hadn't managed to gather a bunch of contribution points through other means?

He would either need to form a Dao Branch or find something valuable to destroy like the mothertree to make another qualitative leap forward on the ladder. For now, he was more interested in what was going on with Ventus Kalavan. Zac's own breakthrough had consumed a decent chunk of the Dao-infused mists in the arena, but it was nothing compared to what was going on around the high elf, who still had his eyes shut.

There was a storm brewing above him. To the point that space itself was affected by the outburst. It didn't crack and form spatial tears. More like the laws of nature changed within ten meters of the elf. It reminded Zac of how it'd felt when he stood before the trapped Dimensional Seed, where his very path was being questioned by the aura Ventus exuded.

It didn't take long for Zac to find his bearings, and he looked on as a five-meter rune appeared above Ventus' head. It

wasn't engraved or inscribed, rather formed by what looked like shimmering stars. Much like the stones in the odd Spirit Tool, only these small stars were made by the Dao itself.

Unsurprisingly, the constellations they created felt far more tangible compared to the one in the Spirit Tool. Looking at the rune was like looking at the Heavens themselves, almost as if he were transported to that mysterious space where Yrial had performed his Dao Impartment.

Behind the motes of light was a vastness Zac had never seen before. A bridge had been formed in the chamber. A bridge between their physical realm and the beyond.

It was a shame that Ventus' path was completely separate from his own. Looking at the process of forming a Dao Branch from first row gave him all kinds of insights, but it would have been far more beneficial if their Daos had been more aligned. As for what Dao Ventus was forming, Zac wasn't certain.

He believed it was technically possible to form a Branch of Numerology, just like it was possible to form Branches of Life or Death from Bodhi and Coffin. You could form many different Dao Branches even if you walked a path of purity as Zac did. Two concepts within the Dao of Order could form a unique Dao, and it seemed as though Ventus might have some relation to stars, going by the Dao Apparition above his head.

The process continued for over an hour, at which point the braziers were completely sucked dry. The elf was forced to take out three more Dao Treasures, each one better than anything Zac owned, to continue the job. The elf was definitely making great progress. The celestial rune above his head kept growing more powerful and condensed.

The position of the stars continuously made small adjustments, approaching perfection with each passing moment. It was almost like when he upgraded **[Indomitability]**, but on a far grander scale. The apparition filled him with awe and left him stunned by its complexity—it was rife with meaning.

Eventually, it seemed like everything clicked into place, and a mysterious pulse spread out from the rune. Zac could

feel it deep in his soul as it passed through him and continued out from the arena. The apparition quickly shrank in size before it entered Ventus through his glabella. Only ten minutes later did he open his eyes, and Zac saw pure elation on his face.

Zac could understand the feeling. Forming a Dao Branch was one of the biggest hurdles to forming a powerful Cosmic Core with some certainty. He was pretty certain the elf already had one Dao Branch, but one's main Dao was more critical to upgrading one's core since it better represented one's path.

With Ventus having formed two Dao Branches, one of which was the extremely hard-to-train Dao of Numerology, reaching Hegemony was just a matter of time. Without it, you needed a unique opportunity or a good chunk of dumb luck to succeed. Those kinds of people would always be limited in their potential since the Dao was the foundation for all cultivation.

A Cultivator Core formed mostly with the help of an external treasure wouldn't be aligned with the Cultivator himself, and would usually have very low potential. Most such Hegemons would never leave the initial stages of the D-grade, though that alone was enough to become an elder in a D-grade force and gain thousands of years of longevity.

It was the same for Zac. Finding proper information on mortals forming their Cultivation Cores was pretty hard since it was so exceedingly rare. The gist of it was that there was no real method to slowly form the foundation of the core like cultivators did through their manuals.

You had to try to forge it in one go, where part of the process was fueled by Dao, and the other part of it was fueled by treasures. It was more than ten times harder than it was for cultivators since the mortal had nothing to build upon. It put even higher requirements on one's Dao, being a more integral part of the process without a cultivation manual to do some of the work.

That alone was what stopped almost all mortals from ever taking that step. Simply gaining a Dao Fragment in the E-

grade was almost impossible with the extremely low affinities mortals had for the Dao. How would they possibly manage to form a Dao Branch that could help stabilize the process?

That was why Galvarion's accomplishment was such a shock. To not only manage to make it into Hegemony, but even past it into Monarchy. He must have been blessed by extraordinary luck to make up for his lacking affinities, finding one opportunity after another to push him along. Of course, it was also possible he'd already become a cultivator by the time he was aiming to form his inner world through boosting his affinities, something that might not be possible for Zac.

"Congratulations," Zac said as Ventus got to his feet. "I feel I gained a lot from seeing your breakthrough."

"Thank you," Ventus smiled. "I'm happy you could take a step forward as well. The fighting style you are forging for yourself—marvelous. I seldom see such integration between man and Dao even back at the temple."

Zac smiled, inwardly a bit confused about that point. For example, while Catheya was extremely adept with her Daos and skills, he didn't feel much of a path from her combat style. It was the same with most people he'd encountered, with only two real exceptions. One was Adcarkas, who perfectly harmonized with the Dao of Space. Even now, Zac felt he was barely beginning to catch up to the Dominator's mastery.

The other was Kenzie when she fought under the guidance of Jeeves.

Ventus was the third person Zac had met who had reached that stage, and he was obviously a rare genius to form this kind of Dao Branch while still in the E-grade. Zac didn't really feel like he personally was some sort of genius when it came to these matters, and his affinities to the Daos were simply abysmal. Was his ability to so easily integrate his Dao a benefit of his constitution or was it the result of his unique road to get where he currently stood?

"I have no idea why a monster like you remains unattached, but my calculations indicate you have some

private issues weighing you down,” Ventus continued. “But you know what, the Radiant Temple doesn’t care about your past as long as you’re not an unorthodox cultivator. If your grudge is with a local faction, why not just come to our place?”

“Your place?” Zac said skeptically. “You’re inviting me to the Radiant Temple?”

“Well, not really.” Ventus laughed as he threw Zac a teleportation token. “I’m just a little disciple myself. It’s not like I can decide who enters. Perhaps if it was some of those highbrow scions with powerful ancestors to rely on, but I’m an outsider myself.”

Zac snatched the token and took a look at it. Its design was completely different from the one he’d gotten from Catheya, and clearly a cut above the other ones he still had in his Cosmos Sack. It was a proper cross-sector teleportation token, and something most people in the frontier dreamed of acquiring.

“Then what’s this?” Zac asked.

“It’s a token to the Lucent Mile Continent in the Yr’Vanium Sector. In case you don’t know, Yr’Vanium is a sector roughly ten times older than Zervereth. You could say it’s in the process of transforming into an established sector from a frontier sector,” Ventus said.

“Yr’Vanium is firmly under the control of the Radiant Temple, and we regularly hold trials on the Lucent Mile Continent. With your strength, you will have no problems at all becoming an outer member, and becoming an Inner Disciple definitely is to be expected. You should only need to temper yourself and your combat style a bit more, and you might even become a core or personal disciple after being vetted for a few years.”

Zac looked at the token with interest, and he eventually put it in his Cosmos Sack.

“Are there any requirements on age or grade to join?” Zac asked. “I can’t say I’m not tempted, but I have some stuff I

need to deal with. I might even be a Hegemon before I'm ready to look for a faction."

"Pretty confident." Ventus grinned. "But I think you have the qualifications to be. There are no strict requirements, but the Temple obviously prefers younger cultivators. Most outsiders who join are between Late E-grade and early Hegemons, and the E-grade cultivators are generally around thirty to fifty years old. Those at the precipice of forming their core might be a few decades older. I honestly doubt the Temple would accept an E-grade cultivator over a hundred years old unless they have some unique skill set or special circumstance. Such as having extreme potential but having been stuck and wasting away on a trash world for too long."

"Are you sure you want to give me this? I might not even be able to go," Zac asked curiously, knowing his identity as a mortal might waste this token. He couldn't say that part out loud though, as his power was just too ridiculous for being a mortal.

"Well, I do get Temple Points for every member I manage to recruit for the sect, so I hope you use the opportunity. But I can always get more contribution points through scamming some young scions," Ventus said with a grin. "I hear a disciple brother of mine got blasted by some crazy Draugr not far from here. He's as smooth as a baby and as red as a lobster right now. I can probably provide a fake divination in return for a good chunk of contribution."

Zac couldn't help but feel sorry for Auride Serveris. He still didn't actually know if the guy had been hostile toward Arcaz Black when they ran into each other the other day, and now he was about to get scammed by his fellow disciple.

"Is there tension between outside members and those who are grandfathered in?" Zac asked to change the subject away from his other persona.

He was honestly contemplating giving it a go in the future if he could enter a place like that without exposing his secrets. Even an outer member would gain access to a lot of knowledge that would benefit most cultivators. He'd seen just

the kind of heritage a fragmented group like the Big Axe Coliseum possessed, and that was nothing compared to what a proper B-grade force like the Radiant Temple would have.

But Zac was a bit hesitant to go if the Radiant Temple was the kind of place where the old families held all the power, turning the whole sect into a pseudo-clan where the outside recruits were barely considered members.

“Well, yeah. Nepotism is a reality in any faction. Otherwise, the old goats at the top wouldn’t work as hard. But it’s not too bad.” Ventus shrugged. “The young lords have better resources, though us outsiders generally have greater talents. It’s the young lords with good talents you have to watch out for.”

“Are any people like that here?” Zac asked.

Ventus didn’t immediately answer, then shrugged like he didn’t care. “Kataron Rissit is one of ours. The Rissit Family’s Supreme Elder is one of the twelve Grand Deacons of the Temple, and Kataron himself is probably their most talented clan member in a hundred generations. He’s not a bad guy, just a tad single track when he’s on a mission. Better stay away from him.”

Zac recognized the name since it belonged to the current fourth-place Ranker on the ladder. Kataron Rissit had started at the fifth spot, barely suppressing the sixth. But every time the ladder appeared, he’d made great strides. After a month he’d surpassed the fourth-place holder, Dravzur Kuldaz, and was currently a hairbreadth away from claiming the third position.

There was still a pretty decent chasm between him and Ykrodas Havarok or Uona Noz’Valadir, but he clearly stood out from the others.

“Right.” Zac nodded. “Thank you, I—”

He didn’t get any further as a tremendous shockwave threw him off his feet, and powerful auras fluctuated from the surface. Another shockwave erupted, and a bunch of screams and the screeching sounds of beasts followed. There was one

clear suspect for the chaos, and Zac grimaced. The Raksha Shrimp King had come knocking.

He had a sneaking suspicion it was because of the ripple Ventus' breakthrough released. He looked at the elf, who responded with a helpless smile.

“What now?” Zac sighed, knowing there were probably tens of thousands of shrimps waiting right beneath the canopy he stood inside.

“Well, you can't subvert fate every time,” Ventus said as he threw an odd array disk to Zac. “Best of luck to you. I hope we meet again. This is the key. Help the others, will you?”

“Ah?” Zac blurted, getting a foreboding sense of déjà vu.

His suspicion was immediately confirmed when the Radiant Temple disciple disappeared in a flash of starlight. Very similar to how Ogras had been swallowed by shadows just after getting Zac to throw out that poison kettle so long ago. Zac laughed at the similarities, then choked on his laughter when he realized the escape talisman he'd taken out wouldn't activate.

Space was sealed.

RAKSHA SHRIMP

Zac glared at the sealed talisman, swearing at both the wily elf and the salesman who'd guaranteed "unparalleled ability to escape even inside a sealed domain" for the talismans.

"Don't be like that. Now hurry, my preparations can only delay the big guy for a minute," the voice of Ventus echoed through the chamber, surprising Zac.

It looked like the elf had known something like this would happen and made preparations. The thing Ventus threw Zac at the end clearly wasn't an escape token, but was meant to deal with the situation above. Zac sighed with some exasperation before he rushed out of the Dao arena, and was met with a scene of utter chaos.

The outer wall was already gone, and there was an enormous hole in the Greengrove canopy right outside the settlement. And from the depths of the tunnel, hundreds of Raksha Shrimps skittered forward, reeking of bloodlust with their six serrated claws ready to tear the settlers apart. Even the smallest of them was four meters long—brutish crustaceans bred for war. The largest specimens were almost twice as big, and Zac guessed they'd be the ones that had reached Peak E-grade, with the rest in the later stages.

They rolled forward like bulldozers, but the protective arrays held while the wall did not. In fact, the whole sky had been replaced by a starry nebula, making Zac feel like he was looking up at space outside the Mystic Realm rather than the greenish haze of the Twilight Ocean. Motes of light were

constantly falling, each one targeting a shrimp that stepped too far.

The motes appeared harmless, yet one massive beast after another fell helplessly to the ground after a simple touch. Piles of them were quickly forming at the edge of the settlement. The two dozen cultivators inside weren't affected, the motes harmlessly passing them by. A few took the opportunity to strike at the shrimp, though most were trying to break out.

It was not only space that had been sealed, the beasts had actually managed to erect a physical barrier, creating a cage far stronger than **[Profane Seal]**. There was a huge water wall encapsulating the whole settlement and the surrounding five hundred meters. Even Ventus' prepared defenses were within the water cage.

As for the source of the barrier, it was pretty obvious: a forty-meter-long Raksha Shrimp King floated in the air above the tunnel it had created. Not only did it have eight enormous claws that made Zac's heart shudder, it had actually formed what looked like wings made of blood-red water.

His best guess was that the Beast King had been tricked into thinking there was some opportunity for a Dao breakthrough hidden in the town and had locked it down in search of it. Thankfully, it looked like it was a bit hesitant about entering because of the odd cloud in the sky, instead letting its children test the water.

Zac shot toward the water wall on the opposite side of the town, away from the Raksha Shrimp King and its minions. Fighting a Beast King was something he planned on doing sooner or later, but there was a time and place for everything. This one possessed a seemingly endless number of followers to throw at him, and some had quite formidable auras.

Besides, the king himself gave off a far more condensed aura than the electric eel, even if the Shrimp King was less than half the size. Not only that, the Raksha Shrimp species were generally considered one of the most dangerous species in the inner layer of the Twilight Ocean, according to the missives, thanks to one special ability of theirs.

They could utilize a War Array.

The king had brought thousands of subjects, and it might be able to turn itself into the equivalent of a Middle-stage Hegemon with their combined contributions. It was no surprise the settlers focused on stalling while trying to break the water wall rather than going all out to take on the king. Few E-grade cultivators would willingly anger a Beast King, even less than a Hegemon.

F-grade beasts were almost always weaker compared to a cultivator, level for level, except for some unique races. E-grade beasts were a bit better off, but still slightly behind. They had gained some basic intelligence and an understanding of the Dao, but remained a tier lower compared to cultivators with their weapons and skills and so on.

However, that all changed at the D-grade. The boost in power for humans was big, and even bigger for beasts. Beast Kings were essentially the lowest grade beasts that were considered bestial cultivators, beings who followed in the steps of the Beast Ancestor.

Only those who managed to purify their bloodline would form a Beast Core, and when that happened, they'd gain a bloodline inheritance. This bloodline inheritance differed greatly in quality and scope between species. Although, even the worst ones were a full kit of both skills and a cultivation method that suited their kind.

Apparently, beasts with extremely pure bloodlines could awaken such an inheritance sooner, some even from birth.

The bloodline evolution alone would give them a tremendous surge in power, and forming a Beast Core would award them with a shocking amount of energy. Such reserves were already one of the things they surpassed cultivators in. With the inheritance itself, they suddenly gained ways to make use of those almost endless stores of Cosmic Energy with skills and to empower those skills with cultivation manuals.

That was why the difference in power between cultivators and beasts was pretty much removed at the D-grade. In fact, the average cultivator was slightly disadvantaged in raw

power. Zac was no average cultivator, but was far from the Peak of the E-grade. The amount of strength he would have to exhibit to deal with this big guy was a lot more than he was willing to show in front of over a dozen elite cultivators.

He decided to follow Ventus' suggestion and help the people escape.

“Keep attacking it,” a burly humanoid roared as he unleashed a tremendous slash with a two-handed sword at the barrier. “We need to exhaust it!”

The others didn't need to be told what to do. They were piling on in an effort to break through the thick wall of water to escape. A few tried to swim right through it, but were rebuffed and bloodied by the attempt.

“It's you!” a familiar face exclaimed when he saw Zac approach. It was the storekeeper who helped him update his [Ocean Chart]. “Where's the boss? We need his help getting out of here!”

“He teleported away,” Zac said with a crooked smile. “I think he's gone already.”

“What!” multiple people exclaimed, glaring at Zac like this was all his fault.

“What are you looking at me for? Do you think I want to be stuck in here with you people?” Zac grunted as he took out his axe.

The next moment, a storm of Axe-infused leaves slammed into the barrier. It just rippled without properly breaking. The barrier was something else, and a showcase of the difference between the D-grade and E-grade. Hegemons simply had a disgusting amount of energy to spare, and the Shrimp King could probably keep infusing the barrier with energy until their whole group was exhausted.

After confirming the situation, Zac took out the item he'd gotten from Ventus. The elf had said this was the key, and Zac's best guess was that it was meant for this very situation. He readied himself as he infused the token with Cosmic

Energy, and instantly felt it emit a shocking cold. He had a good guess what was going on.

“The boss prepared a key! Get ready!” Zac roared to those few keeping the shrimp at bay, and threw the talisman at the barrier.

A huge seal appeared from the token and the rippling water of the barrier immediately started to freeze. The water wall soon turned into solid ice. That wasn't the only change. Much of the energy that filled the water was nullified, making the ice not much stronger than a normal wall. However, the window of opportunity was limited as an enraged roar erupted from the Beast King.

The Raksha Shrimp King could clearly sense what was going on, but an almost blinding starlight illuminated the area as a storm of silver leaves shot toward the rapidly freezing wall, cutting out a large chunk of ice in one go. A few more mighty attacks enlarged the escape path even farther, forming a proper pathway.

Zac flashed forward with [**Loamwalker**], appearing far outside the barrier in an instant. Three cultivators were even quicker than he was, and most of the others were hot on Zac's heels. The whole island shook the next moment, and Zac knew the Beast King had been forced into action.

This was no place to stay, and he rushed on, his steps empowered by his movement skill, streaking him toward a neighboring island. A crash and an eruption of Cosmic Energy from behind indicated the Beast King had caught up to someone. Zac didn't stop to look. He'd already paved the path; the others would have to deal with the fallout themselves. As for Zac, he set course for the depths of the Mystic Realm.

He was occasionally forced to jump to the bottom of the shallow lakes to activate the movement skill again, but he was making great progress across the archipelago. He stopped ten minutes later to get his bearings, and it thankfully didn't look like any of the shrimp had followed him.

There were, however, a few cultivators on neighboring islands. They bowed in his direction before disappearing, and

he followed suit by jumping into one of the rivers of the Greengrove Archipelago. In short order, he'd dug a hole that took him to the ocean proper beneath the canopies.

The Raksha Shrimp were probably still gathered around the encampment, looking for the Dao Treasure the Shrimp King thought he'd sensed. They would probably spread out the moment they couldn't find it, aiming at the cultivators instead. Zac didn't want to spend any more time in the area than he had to.

Huge swathes of land, or rather water, had been added to his [**Ocean Chart**], and Zac started planning his route as he pushed onward. Most of the added spots were unsurprisingly in the earlier parts of the Twilight Ocean. It was like Ventus had said, the temporary settlement seemed to be at the nexus of four paths, of which the route he'd taken was one.

However, some parts had been scouted that went even deeper than the settlement itself. Zac had "wasted" almost two months between Catheya's mission and his cultivation session, where some had reached this area over a month ago. A promising route to the Twilight Chasm had already been found, and it took Zac only hesitated for a few seconds before changing course for the already charted path.

The map bought from a temporary settlement didn't hold all the private markers cultivators could add, such as warnings of powerful beasts or natural disasters, but it was still safer than going about things blind. The route would take him through Greengrove Archipelago and then some, where one of the settlers had spotted the beginning of another stream.

That stream was most likely one of the dozen-odd currents leading to the Twilight Chasm and into its depths, and also the quickest way for Zac to get where he needed to go.

Before setting off, there was one thing to take care of. He was currently swimming between the towering mangroves. He swam a bit closer to one, and without warning, pivoted in the water and stomped off against the trunk, utilizing the tree to activate [**Loamwalker**].

He flashed a few hundred meters forward, at which point he double-jumped to instantly change his direction and move around another trunk. There was nothing in sight, but a storm of leaves shot out as Zac swung [**Verun's Bite**] with a ruthless gleam in his eyes.

The water shuddered as two bloodied men appeared out of nowhere, both looking at Zac with surprise and trepidation.

“Is there some sort of misunderstanding?” one of the men asked. “We just escaped with our lives. Why attack us like this?”

“Preemptive self-defense,” Zac shrugged.

Zac had actually realized someone was following him for a while now. Part of it was thanks to his Peak-mastery [**Cosmic Gaze**]. Each improvement to the skill brought the same benefit: greater detail to his energy vision. By the time it reached Peak mastery, it captured even the weakest hint of attunement.

Not only that, he just evolved his Tree-based Dao and was inside a forest, which made his senses extremely keen. Zac noticed there was a spot with weaker attunement a few hundred to a thousand meters behind him. That was often the telltale sign of an illusion array or cloaking skill that didn't quite match up to Zac's own sentry abilities.

The most sure-fire way was obviously his Luck. With his recent Dao evolutions, the mostly stagnant attribute had finally taken some steps forward and was approaching 1,000 effective Luck. That was a shocking amount for E-grade cultivators, providing great benefits. His warning senses had never been sharper, and he could feel something amiss just from the fact he was being targeted. Previously, the danger would have needed to be palpable for him to get this way.

The two had tried to make it look like Zac made a mistake, but he could sense killing intent hidden in their eyes. As expected, they shot for Zac, brandishing their weapons. They could probably tell their ploy had failed and decided to attack to retain some of the element of surprise.

Zac wasn't worried. A vast fractal forest sprang up among the mangroves, making sure he'd sense if there were more people lurking in the area. His aura exploded to a level that far exceeded what he displayed inside the town, and the water churned from his roiling killing intent. This deep into the Twilight Ocean, an outburst of this kind essentially represented a Heaven's Chosen.

They were clearly shocked by the display, and one took out an escape talisman without hesitation.

“Wai—” the other man screamed in alarm. Zac had already pounced on him.

The robber's head was lopped off as the other man activated the talisman. Only to be dragged back by the chains of [**Love's Bond**] before he was finished. Zac deactivated [**Hatchetman's Spirit**] and scurried away after looting their rings and corpses.

The gambit had been a huge success. Zac was definitely powerful enough to deal with those warriors without too much effort, but it shouldn't have been that easy. They were elites who dared travel in the depths of the Twilight Ocean. Zac didn't want to attract any attention with a prolonged battle, so he'd unleashed an unnaturally powerful aura to catch them off guard, courtesy of his bloodline and [**Spiritual Void**].

The two must have thought he was a monster with a Middle-stage Dao Branch between not being restrained at all and having his aura so condensed. They would definitely have figured out it was just fake power within a second or two, if not for dying long before that.

Zac traveled for another ten days, continuing his progress between going over Catheya's fractals and battling various beasts that made the expansive mangrove forest their home. His Dao evolution was rapidly being consolidated into his path, and he was shoring up the insights into his path he'd gained as well.

Soon enough, he reached the edges of the Greengrove Archipelago, but didn't leave just yet. He found an inconspicuous tree an hour from the edge and dug a small

cultivation cave in its crown. He plugged the hole with the branches he cut out and followed up by setting down a couple of arrays to seal the area.

He'd already incorporated his lessons from upgrading **[Indomitable]** and pushed his life-attuned Dao Fragment to Peak. Now that things had calmed down, it was time to make a real go at upgrading his skills.

UPGRADES

Zac felt he'd accumulated enough to have another go at upgrading his skills, but rushing things at this juncture would create a lot of extra work down the road. The better the state of his skills were post-evolution, the less effort he'd need to spend on fixing them later. He went over every skill fractal fastidiously while going over his plans, checking and double-checking the missives he collected before collating everything against his insights into his recently evolved Daos.

The next stop would be the Twilight Chasm itself, a terrifying place where other cultivators were only one of many worries. There were natural death traps and beasts aplenty, and the few cultivators who were traversing the chasm were all peak talents at the level of Yanub Mettleleaf or higher. Running around with mostly F-grade skills in that place was idiotic, even borderline suicidal.

His insights had obviously not reached the limits of the E-grade yet, but they were good enough to perform adequately when upgrading his skills. He would get more hands-on experience as well, making the process easier with every attempt. The first target of his upgrade in his human form was carefully chosen for this very reason.

[Hatchetman's Rage]. The berserking skill's pattern was even simpler than **[Indomitable]**, and shouldn't be too hard to upgrade even if he planned on making minor adjustments. With the lesson learned from this attempt, he would proceed to the more complex patterns.

Still, it took three full days before Zac took out another [**Fractal Framework Array**], this version slightly different compared to the previous one. Its base function was the same, but ran on Cosmic Energy and was made to help with life and nature-related skills. It was one of the items he'd made the Hexmaster buy for him after collecting everything for his Draugr cultivation himself.

The array lit up, and Zac gingerly cut off the skill fractal and infused it into the core disk. A hologram appeared, and he started making adjustments following his plan. The patterns grew denser and more intricate as Zac upgraded one section after another of the fractal. The patterns had a different flavor compared to the ones in his undead form, but the distinctions were simply to accommodate the different types of energy sources. Their fundamental functions were the same.

There was a delicate balance in the skill fractal. An equilibrium between patterns responsible for providing the temporary boost of [**Hatchetman's Rage**], and patterns that kept the process stable for as long as possible while minimizing the backlash. The change Zac wanted to enact was simple: more power. The boost provided by [**Hatchetman's Rage**] didn't need to be a full minute. A battle could be decided in less than a second, as the fight the other day proved.

Besides, his body was unnaturally durable thanks to his extremely high Endurance and Vitality, along with his mother's machinations. The backlash he had to endure was drastically weakened compared to normal cultivators, so making the skill a bit more slanted should work just fine. As long as he didn't go insane like he had after eating the [**Rageroot Oak Seeds**], the more power it released, the better.

However, the skill fractal suddenly started to shake as warning messages appeared next to the hologram, causing Zac to frown with worry. Things weren't quite out of control, but it was clear his adjustments threatened to destroy the skill fractal's balance. The fractal had to be constantly filled with Cosmic and Mental Energy to stay malleable, and it was this

that made the process so precarious since the energy could go wild and ruin the whole fractal.

Zac didn't panic as he rapidly kept going, upgrading the counterforce to the boosting section. But he wasn't fast enough. The fractal was becoming too imbalanced. He thought he'd made enough concessions to keep the process stable even after adding so much force into the skill, but it looked like he still lacked some theoretical foundation.

At least he had a solution in mind, and made a temporary release valve like Catheya once mentioned, providing an outlet for the energy building up to ominous levels. It was a temporary measure, one that would allow him to work on the main diagram that would naturally contain the power.

Only when it was stable enough did he remove the release valve and patch up the spot with the original patterns. An intervention like that weakened the pattern by a couple of percent, but it was far preferable to letting the thing blow up.

After that little hiccup, the process continued without any real surprises. Overall, the result was pretty good, and Zac managed to return a recently evolved skill fractal to its proper position with mental energy to spare. The fractal looked somewhat similar to before, except it was obviously lopsided now with a much larger section being reserved for power-boosting.

It was a huge sphere with small additions below, and it made Zac think of a setting sun. He'd expended more than 80% of his mental reserves in the process, forcing him to take a break. That was fine with him, and he curiously opened his Status Screen to check the result while he started absorbing energy from a Soul Crystal.

[E] Arcadian Crusade – Proficiency: Early. Nothing will deny the vengeance of Arcadia, not even death itself.

Zac's heart beat an extra time reading the description, but sighed when he saw he hadn't actually upgraded his title. That meant the skill was still a High-quality one, but that the adjustments to the fractal were large enough that not only the description was changed, but even the name.

Unfortunately, there was still no description of how the skill worked. Curiosity gnawed at Zac as he recovered his mental energy. Initially, he'd planned to immediately move on to evolving the next skill, but ended up caving and decided to activate the skill to get some practical experience of the process.

He activated a surveying array to confirm there were no cultivators in the immediate vicinity before pushing Cosmic Energy into his new skill fractal. The world turned white as a tremendous explosion erupted around him, turning the sturdy wood of the mangrove into shredded splinters shot hundreds of meters in every direction, creating a huge disturbance in the ocean.

Fury coursed through his veins, and the fires of war burned in his eyes as his pathways were expanded to a bursting point. The water around Zac churned as a white-and-gold set of fractals covered his skin in what looked a bit like a tribal tattoo. Zac could only see it on his hands, but felt that both his arms and chest were also covered.

It was almost a shame he wouldn't be able to test out this shocking amount of force that rippled through his body.

However, Zac soon cursed his errant thoughts as space bent before spitting out a massive creature that was more maw than body. It had no doubt been attracted by the eruption of energy from the activation, and swam toward Zac with murder in its eyes. The hideous creature looked a bit like an anglerfish without the antenna, and was clearly in the early stages of Hegemony.

He hadn't planned on fighting a D-grade beast today, but that didn't stop Zac from engaging without hesitation. There was no telling how long the boosting effect would last after his change, but it would definitely be shorter compared to before. He needed to settle this quickly.

The Beast King was enraged to find an E-grade cultivator rather than a natural treasure at the source of the energy eruption. A high-pitched shriek echoed among the Greengrove Trees as a water blade spanning hundreds of meters rushed

toward Zac, cutting apart trees like they were made from paper.

However, a leaf large enough to look like something plucked from a world tree appeared in front of Zac, and it cut through the water with unstoppable force. Blade met leaf, and the whole section of the forest shook from the collision. The Beast King's probing attack was imbued with vast amounts of energy. And yet, it was no match for the ferocity contained in Zac's empowered swing.

It broke apart and turned into a series of chaotic currents. Zac cut through those as well as he kept going forward. One of the nearby trees was on the verge of collapsing, but Zac managed to reach it in time to launch himself with the help of **[Loamwalker]**. It looked like someone had set off a bomb where Zac pushed off for leverage, and the force from his step was the straw that broke the camel's back, shattering the mangrove in the middle.

Space shrank, but Zac suddenly found himself severely slowed down when he got within a few hundred meters of the Beast King. The fifty-meter-long anglerfish had erected some sort of domain. It looked like it was meant to trap rather than allow it an escape, as it still swam straight for Zac.

Its maw opened wide, almost as though it revealed a portal to another dimension. The momentum of the crusade still urged Zac on, and there was zero hesitation in his heart as another enormous leaf appeared, this one rapidly gaining a radiant golden hue as it unleashed an enormous haze of pure life that moved to encompass the whole anglerfish.

The deathly fog of the Abyss followed almost instantly behind the radiance of Arcadia, and a storm of unparalleled proportions was unleashed in the direction of the poor Beast King. It immediately realized that it was in trouble, but it was too late, as it had almost reached Zac. It tried to erect a barrier; even a D-grade beast's defenses proved insufficient to deal with **[Rapturous Divide]** empowered by **[Arcadian Crusade]** and the ocean itself.

In fact, Zac felt he could boost the effect even further, but he chose to restrain himself for one simple reason; doing so would actually cost him life force. What he currently unleashed was more than enough, so paying such a steep price on a random beast was overkill.

The delimitation between Arcadia and the Abyss was just as chaotic this time around, perhaps even more so. Space fractured and recovered perpetually, and long tendrils of destruction spread in every direction as the two clouds shrouded the Beast King. It desperately tried to escape using the same sort of spatial displacement as before, but not even a Hegemon could traverse space this fractured.

The anglerfish had no choice but to withstand the chaos that engulfed it with its skills and the durability of its body. But the madness Zac had unleashed was not something a freshly evolved Beast King could withstand. Perhaps that Raksha Shrimp King would have fared better thanks to its thick shell, but the scales on this deep-sea dweller were unable to withstand the spatial cracks.

Enormous lacerations were cut across its body, and Zac felt a tremendous surge of energy before he even had a chance to follow up his initial salvo with **[Arcadia's Judgment]**. The water eventually calmed, and Zac looked at the mangled remains of the Beast King with some helplessness.

He had expected his first battle against a Beast King to be an epic contest between man and nature. The reality was more like a wanton slaughter. His new skill had added a full 35% power, and had also increased the speed he activated his two skills by a large degree thanks to forcibly turning his pathways into superhighways.

The latter wasn't that impressive considering his bloodline, but he wouldn't need to be nearly as careful with this ability compared to **[Force of the Void]**. For now, he needed to get out of here. The odds of any other cultivator being in the area were pretty low, but the waves he caused weren't small.

Zac didn't want to risk it, especially with an impending backlash, and was filled with a sense of impending doom as he

hurried away. He'd gained enough strength to rip an early Beast King to shreds from his new skill, and the price for such power was likely to be equally impressive.

As expected, he didn't get very far before searing pain spread throughout his body, and he couldn't stop himself from releasing a weak whimper as he sank to the bottom of the forest. His veins were set on fire, only this time in a completely different sense. Like he'd been poisoned on top of being run through the wringer.

The backlash from [**Hatchetman's Rage**] had mostly been a wave of weakness that lasted a few hours, but this reached into Zac's very soul, eclipsing what he'd been forced to endure when using the [**Bone-forging Dust**]. He needed to create at least some distance from the scene of the battle, but he could barely swim in his current state.

Without any better options, Zac activated one of his escape talismans, finding himself tens of thousands of meters away. Getting forcibly transported like that only worsened his pain, but he activated another three talismans before he was satisfied. Only then did he dig a small burrow beneath a large root of a random mangrove, and continued to dig until he was nestled over a hundred meters beneath the ocean bed.

Falling asleep was risky, but his eyes refused to stay open and he descended into a deep slumber.

A nibbling pain startled him awake sometime later, and he found himself covered in forty-centimeter-long mollusks trying to break through his skin with small pincers. A wave of killing intent made them scurry away into the sand, allowing Zac to check his state in peace. Surface wounds from the critters aside, he was mostly healed after activating his new skill.

However, he'd slept for half a day while recuperating, and so deeply, random beasts actually thought him a corpse.

The backlash was pretty bad, but Zac believed it would become more manageable over time as his strength grew and his bloodline kept evolving. If anything, this was exactly what he'd been looking to achieve when evolving the skill. The

effect was palpable. A boost of roughly 35% was a drastic improvement compared to the 25% of **[Hatchetman's Rage]**.

Besides, his old berserker skill had been unable to completely boost his attributes now that they'd outgrown the skill, reducing the actual effect to something like 10%. **[Arcadian Crusade]** had no such limitations, providing a massive augmentation that lasted around fifteen seconds.

The duration was even shorter compared to **[Hatchetman's Rage]** when it was at Early mastery, but fifteen seconds was more than enough to cause a whole lot of damage.

Even better, **[Arcadian Crusade]** allowed him to empower it by expending longevity if his back was really against the wall in the future. It was a bit like the Anointed's unique methods, trading life for power. Zac could already empower strikes with his life force if he really needed to, but doing it through a skill would definitely have a greater effect than using it "raw."

The experiment could tentatively be considered a success. He'd probably be a bit more careful after evolving a skill from here on. He was still emboldened by success, and Zac soon dug his way up through the sand and set out in search of a new cultivation cave. The previous set of defensive arrays to hide his cave had been destroyed by activating his new skill. Luckily he had over ten identical sets just in case.

Soon enough, another canopy had been hollowed out, and another set of illusion, isolation, and defensive arrays hummed to life as Zac started to focus on the next skill to evolve. He took half a day to analyze his mistake where he'd almost made **[Arcadian Crusade]** collapse, and how it applied to the other skills he planned on upgrading. Only then did he activate the array and the process started anew.

One skill after another was transformed over the next week, all of them successfully elevated to the next tier. Almost every evolution had some twists and turns, but he was definitely satisfied with the results.

[E] Arcadian Crusade – Proficiency: Early. Nothing will deny the vengeance of Arcadia, not even death itself. Upgradeable.

[E] Forester's Constitution – Proficiency: Early. All living beings under the Heavens are one entity. Upgradeable.

[E] Earthstrider – Proficiency: Early. Traverse the boundless worlds, unrestrained and unfettered. Upgradeable.

[E] Piercing Gaze – Proficiency: Early. Unravel their secrets. Upgradeable.

Four upgrades, and only one had been relegated to a lower grade.

MINEFIELD

Three core skills were directly upgraded to their E-grade equivalent without any major issues, with **[Forester's Constitution]** mostly staying the same and **[Loamwalker]** being adjusted to the point it was given a new name. The former skill was a passive buff that boosted his Endurance and Vitality, with the Peak skill adding something like an inborn instinct for the forests, helping him find opportunities and avoid dangers.

Zac had tried to put more focus on the part that improved his instincts, but it proved too complicated. He guessed that part drew inspiration from the Dao of Nature, and he was currently veering away from that path toward the Dao of Life. The two were fairly closely related, but were ultimately paths of their own.

Still, his efforts had been enough to slightly change the description to no longer just mention "Man and Nature," instead incorporating all living things. It was a step in the right direction, and he hoped it would broaden how the skill could be used. Being so dependent on nearby forests to provide the full benefits was a weakness he wanted to move away from somewhat.

He didn't really sense anything different from the skill itself, although his attributes had gained a small boost. That wasn't because the skill provided more points, but rather that it could scale with even his massive attribute pools. It now provided 15% Endurance and Vitality, as it had before Zac's attributes grew too big.

Perhaps the instinct would work like that as well, providing a natural understanding of stronger plants and places. After all, Zac doubted [**Forester's Constitution**] could give many insights to things like D-grade plants before.

The changes to [**Loamwalker**] were more extensive, where he mainly focused on improving the part that represented his double-jump. Staying inside the ocean had showed how big a weakness it was to always be landlocked. Soon enough, he would fight Hegemons who all could fly, so he needed to improve the skill's aerial performance.

It looked like his change was a success, but he would have to test it out after leaving in a bit.

Unfortunately, problems cropped up when he attempted to evolve [**Cosmic Gaze**]. Its fractal wasn't too complicated on the surface, but contained a few unique patterns that weren't present in his class skills. This had created some hidden connections and unexpected dependencies that made the skill far more complicated to upgrade than Zac expected.

He'd been forced to perform one patchwork after another as the skill fractal became unstable, and the result was [**Piercing Gaze**], which Zac estimated was a High-quality sibling to [**Cosmic Gaze**]. It was a sobering wake-up call that there was still a lot he didn't know when it came to patterns, and was also a good reminder that skills from outside sources ultimately weren't as in tune with his understanding as his class skills or ones he would create himself in the future.

Upgrading them would require greater preparation, and some might be doomed to fail because of lacking compatibility.

Zac wasn't too beat up over the loss. A High-quality E-grade investigative skill was still pretty much equivalent to his old skill at Peak mastery. Besides, he still had the original skill in his Draugr form. He would prepare some more before upgrading the skill on his undead side, and hopefully, it would retain its full strength that time. As long as he succeeded, he would reform [**Piercing Gaze**] and restore it to its former glory on his human form.

Making some mistakes was ultimately normal and something that happened to most people when upgrading their skills. Keeping them at the F-grade, waiting for perfection, was a fool's errand, as it would delay his own progression. He was already halfway to Late E-grade, and he still hadn't completed the step that most finished before reaching Middle E-grade.

Adjusting skill fractals after the initial process was a chore, but possible. They were like brittle glass, and every change had to be slowly and carefully performed. Fixing one was an arduous process that would take a couple of years. Still, it was something he could add to his daily cultivation routine, taking a few minutes every day to work on those that needed to be fixed.

The downside was that it was a bit risky to use the skills while doing those kinds of upgrades, so he wouldn't be able to do so inside the Mystic Realm.

Some mistakes were expected, but he still left **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** alone as he swapped to his Draugr form. That skill was simply too complex, and he wasn't confident in changing it without System assistance. Repairing mistakes was fine and all, but that was only true up to a point. If he messed up to the point the skill became unrecognizable, then there was only so much he could do.

This time he meditated a full day before activating the array, and the fractal of **[Fields of Despair]** came to bare. The Peak-quality skills were more intricate compared to the High-quality of his old Hatchetman class, but this particular domain was one of three basic skills he'd gained at level 25. Its effect was great, but the patterns were nowhere near the complexity of **[Profane Seal]**.

Besides, some of the structures were surprisingly reminiscent of **[Hatchetman's Rage]** and **[Forester's Constitution]**. It was a marvel in a sense. Two opposing concepts with opposite effects, one buffing and one cursing, had such a similar appearance.

Soon enough the process was complete, and a new skill fractal entered his body.

[E] Fields of Despair – Proficiency: Early. A desolate haze, both entrapping and illuminating. Upgradeable.

The upgrade was a success with Zac only making small adjustments. He'd given up some of the skill's ability to provide Miasma to other undead warriors, and in turn, expanded the omniscience it provided from Peak mastery. Ideally, he would have done away with those parts meant for warfare entirely, but they were an integral part of the fractal.

Cutting them out would have caused too big an imbalance, to the point Zac had no way to upgrade the skill at all. He would have to gently steer the skill in the direction he desired with each upgrade, and by the time he became a Monarch, it might be completely in tune with his path.

Just like with **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**, Zac didn't dare to touch **[Vanguard of Undeath]** and **[Profane Seal]**.

There was still reason to celebrate after this latest boost in power. Just over half a year had passed since Zac entered the trial, and the improvements he'd made were shocking.

His raw attributes had increased by almost 80% since he'd left for the Havenfort Chasm, and his effective combat strength had increased even further. If he fought that Half-Step Blacksmith Golem today, he would be able to take it down without using any berserking items, and the same was probably true for Adcarkas.

Then again, as he got stronger, so would his adversaries.

There was no time to lose, so Zac set off again, heading for the stream indicated on the map. He continued to travel in his human form, and he finally found a chance to try out **[Earthstrider]**. He swam between the mangroves, when a patch of grass suddenly appeared around his feet, and he disappeared the next moment.

Zac appeared again a few hundred meters away, only staying for a fraction of a second before he disappeared again, this time a few flowers appearing around his feet. He kept

going until he felt a sense of hollowness in the skill and landed on the seabed. The skill was quickly recharged by some unseen force, and he felt he could flash away any time he wanted.

This was exactly what he'd hoped for. He could already create a similar effect with [**Hatchetman's Spirit**], but this was far more convenient. [**Earthstrider**] actually created a patch of greenery right by his feet, allowing him to move unencumbered just like his double-jump. However, he only managed five jumps before he was forced to land.

Still, that was a huge improvement, especially considering he didn't even need to start the skill on the ground. The movement capabilities of [**Earthstrider**] themselves were barely superior compared to [**Loamwalker**], but Zac didn't care. It already performed great in battles, and would be even more flexible going forward.

Zac was close to the edge of the archipelago, after which he entered the more open water. The energy was extremely dense, ensuring the ocean wouldn't be empty. If anything, it was teeming with life—corals, weeds, and all kinds of plants fought for space on the seabed.

An endless number of fishes and beasts scuttled between them, most relatively harmless even though they emitted energy signatures at E-grade. Zac was only occasionally forced to fight. Unleashing his aura was enough to make whole shoals spanning hundreds of meters swim for their lives.

He continued through the verdant ocean for another week before there was a change. He'd reached an odd stretch of water with ball-like plants covered in beautiful flowers that swayed as the balls lazily bobbed about. They were mostly stationary, looking like flourishing miniature planets. Zac still felt a vague sense of danger, enough that passing through them seemed risky. If even impossible, considering there had to be millions of them.

The water was filled from the surface all the way down to the seabed, and were placed so closely, they were like a solid

wall. His **[Ocean Chart]** told him to go straight through, but Zac decided to trust his instincts and try to see if he could pass them.

Trying to find another route merely replaced the bobbing balls with an endless sea of jellyfish. Each sporting hundreds of tentacles over fifty meters long. Zac didn't recognize the balls, but was aware of these jellyfish. They were both venomous and voracious, trying to snatch up any cultivator who drew near.

Ultimately, he chose to backtrack to the field of weird planets. He had no desire to tangle with hundreds of thousands of jellyfish. The one who filled in the **[Ocean Chart]** must have passed through the minefield of flower balls since the map went right through the patch they filled up.

Zac prepared some escape talismans just in case, and used both **[Piercing Gaze]** and **[Forester's Constitution]** as he made his way through the minefield. A long rattan vine suddenly flew out of the closest ball, and Zac instantly cut it off with his axe. The water around the cut filled with a dark haze, and Zac instantly felt a sharp uptick of Twilight Energy in his body.

It was similar to the Hollowtongues, which allowed Zac to shrug off most of the effect and swim away. However, a sweet scent attracted his attention, and he saw a small berry sitting alone on the crown of the weird plant. A chain shot forward with lightning-quick speed, snatching the fruit up and dragging it back just in time to avoid dozens of rattans that emerged from the ball.

The inert ball of green growth appeared infuriated by the theft, and it raged as it searched for the culprit. Even a few of the neighboring balls were attacked, causing something of a chain reaction of destruction in the area. Zac found himself assailed from every direction, but his evolved **[Forester's Constitution]** proved its worth.

He instinctively understood how these previously unknown plants would act, and he swam in a pattern that allowed him to dodge most of the vines. The few that were

unavoidable were cut apart by a Bodhi-infused [**Nature's Edge**]. Such an attack full of life-attuned aura didn't seem to draw the semi-sapient plants' attention, allowing him to avoid any further retaliation.

Zac barely had time to get out of the danger zone before spotting another ball with a fruit on top of it. Another chain shot forward and ripped the whole bush off the mini-planet. As expected, a wave of destruction was unleashed, forcing Zac to bob and weave.

Things continued like this for two days, at which point Zac left the area a bedraggled mess. Wounds covered his body, and he held ominous volumes of toxins. Zac felt it was worth it. The toxins should be flushed in a few days from a mix of his pills and hidden node, leaving no lasting downsides. Meanwhile, he'd managed to loot over two hundred of those odd fruits.

They weren't listed in any of the compendiums, but considering they were in the depths of the Twilight Ocean, they had to be good things. After all, that minefield would probably take out 99% of the cultivators entering. As for their function, Zac actually guessed they were related to body tempering.

The fruits had a slightly bloody aura, and Zac's cells greedily reacted to them much in the same way when put in front of bloodline treasures like the [**Blood Nucleus**] or [**Cardinal Kernel**]. He stowed them, happy to see his preparations for his bloodline evolution grow more and more comprehensive.

It didn't take Zac long after passing the minefield to find the stream on the map, and the area was blessedly void of other cultivators. One more week passed, and things calmed down after he hitched his vessel to the stream. The vessel he currently used was the same one he'd looted from the Havarok scion. It was simply the best one he had, no matter if considering base materials or quality of arrays.

He'd spotted a few Beast Kings far in the distance, but most minded their own business. Many Beast Kings possessed

intelligence equivalent to cultivators, and probably understood that cultivators who managed to reach these depths of the Twilight Ocean weren't someone to mess with.

After all, the life span of Beast Kings was around ten times that of cultivators, and the oldest ones have likely lived through dozens of trials. Of course, others followed their innate bloodlust and tried to attack his vessel, but Zac was long gone before they reached him.

The ship didn't have any purification features installed, and the base design relied on cultivation arrays to make the insides more bearable. If it had been before, this wouldn't have been an issue, but as time passed, Zac felt himself increasingly under pressure. After another week passed, Zac's body reached its limit.

Thankfully it wasn't the limit of what he could endure, but rather the limit of what his body could passively expel without him lifting a finger. **[Void Heart]** currently beat once every minute, which seemed to be the limit in these conditions. There was a wave of relief after every beat, but more Twilight Energy entered his body than his hidden node swallowed.

Some of the leftovers were dealt with by **[Purity of the Void]**, which wasn't nearly as effective for this particular purpose. It fell to Zac to manually process the leftovers just like all other cultivators had done since entering the trial. He expelled a little bit of Cosmic Energy, and his body naturally absorbed the Twilight Energy instead.

It felt like breathing stale air, where his bloodline was thankfully doing the heavy lifting. The effect was currently far less severe than normal cultivators even at the starting continent. Still, it also meant he would be more and more restrained as he kept going.

The soul ocean was filling up pretty fast in this place as well, but Zac felt he should be able to go for at least two months before his life-attuned ocean reached max capacity. At that point, his resistance against the environment would drop even further. A detriment there wasn't much he could do about.

That was why he needed to rid himself of the odd stone and perhaps snatch some treasures before returning to depths he could handle. And finally, Zac saw his journey was coming to an end. The ocean bed simply stopped far in the distance, replaced with endless darkness. The stream took a sharp turn and plunged into the chasm, heading God knows where in the depths of the Mystic Realm.

He'd reached the Twilight Chasm.

TWILIGHT CHASM

The enormous chasm grew closer, and Zac steered his vessel away from the stream and stowed it after swapping to his Draugr form. Though his undead soul ocean was even more filled compared to his living one, he'd chosen to travel the final stretch in his Draugr form, at least until he got a better lay of the land.

When comparing his two classes, Fetters of Desolation currently had greater survivability. With **[Force of the Void]** and **[Abyssal Phase]** working together, he could instantly escape most perilous situations to an even larger degree than his upgraded **[Earthstrider]**. More importantly, this final task of his was definitely related to whatever the big shots outside had planned, and he didn't want to get his human persona involved in this mess.

He'd drop off the odd egg before swapping over to his human form, completely washing his hands of whatever schemes the Monarchs had.

Zac had read about the Twilight Chasm, but seeing it with his own eyes was something else. It looked like an endless hole that reached into eternity, far surpassing the Havenfort Chasm in scope. It wasn't an empty hole though, as he spotted dozens of interconnected mountains sticking up from the depths. All in all, the chasm was almost as big as the starting continent, meaning it would take weeks to swim across.

Of course, that wasn't really possible. Beasts and cultivators were some of the dangers in this place, but another was the unpredictable currents. Zac looked over to his left,

catching sight of the stream he'd hitched a ride in until this point. It turned into a veritable waterfall that descended into the depths, and he vaguely spotted another similar situation farther away.

All in all, there were over a hundred streams that had the Twilight Chasm as their endpoint, plunging into the abyss, heading God knows where. The best guess was that the streams formed a loop, and they'd emerge again where they started. Of course, no one had survived attempting to find out, as dropping into the depths of the chasm was a death sentence.

Just the surface of the Twilight Chasm had an energy density far surpassing any other area of the Twilight Ocean, and got worse the deeper you descended, from what he'd gathered. Hopefully, he wouldn't have to go too far down to drop off this egg, as even he wouldn't survive down there.

Zac took out the odd stone from his Spatial Ring, looking between it and the ravine. He doubted the mission was as simple as just throwing the thing inside, but he'd never actually received a more detailed guidance from Va Tapek when he handed this thing over. A weak fluctuation appeared around his hand as the icy brand appeared on it again, and Zac groaned when he received a burst of energy into his mind.

His vision changed as he shot through turbulent water and jagged cliffs. The scene took him to a secluded valley through a hidden pathway, where an ancient altar stood erected in the middle. On it, the stone in his hand pulsed, and each beat awakened a few mysterious runes around it.

Soon enough his vision was back to normal, and Zac looked down at the orb with exasperation. As expected, there was a specific drop-off site stored inside the brand. The bad news was he would need to actually enter the Twilight Chasm. The good news was he didn't actually need to enter its heart.

The weird altar was located a quarter of the way into the Twilight Chasm, and wasn't that far from his current location. Zac guessed Va Tapek must have surmised Zac would reach the Twilight Chasm from this general direction. Every second he loitered in this area was another second he was worn down

a little bit more by the Twilight Energy, so Zac wasted no time in setting out.

He didn't immediately jump out into the vast unknown. Zac first made his way back and forth along the precipice, constantly rooting his chains into the bedrock to make sure he wasn't ripped into the chasm by an unpredictable current. He was trying to find a patch of calmer water to enter through, but it became apparent there was no such thing.

Going above water served no purpose. That place was even scarier than below the surface. Hundreds of streams converging into one spot didn't just do a number on the environment in the water, it was even worse up there. Hurricanes and insanely powerful winds made things deadly even for Hegemons. The chaotic currents in the chasm were safe by comparison. At least unless you had something like a Branch of Gale to protect you from the winds.

Zac found a somewhat decent spot and jumped off the ledge, finding himself assaulted by sharp waves from every direction. They tried to rip him down to the depths, and he was forced to keep expelling large amounts of Miasma to move forward. If he relented for even a second, he would be swept up by the water and dragged into that endless void.

His situation was luckily manageable thanks to the combination of his Draugr vision and [**Cosmic Gaze**].

The more powerful the current, the more energy it contained, which essentially turned the danger spots into brightly lit streams he could circumvent. That didn't mean he was safe, as the streams constantly changed direction like a bucking horse, forcing Zac to scramble out of the way more than once.

Suddenly, his mind screamed of imminent and deadly danger. A stream was veering straight toward him like a snake, and he had no choice but to forcibly activate [**Abyssal Phase**] with the help of his bloodline talent. He was turned into a cloud of energy, but his whole being screamed with pain as he felt himself being ripped apart. Zac only managed to move a

second in his abyssal form before he was forced out of it. That second had thankfully put him out of harm's way.

He was completely drenched in dripping ichor when he returned to his physical form, a poignant reminder that he wasn't immortal in his energy form. He'd already suspected as much when being trapped in the Living Pulse, but knowing what could and what couldn't harm him wasn't an exact science. Clearly, rampaging Twilight Energy was on the list of dangers to his intangible form.

Every second was a struggle as Zac steadily made his way toward the first mountain ridge inside the chasm, and his reserves started to dip to dangerous levels. Just traversing the empty space was difficult enough. He was also constantly forced to put a great deal of effort into dealing with the Twilight Energy accumulating in his body.

The density had essentially doubled the moment he jumped from the ledge, and it was only getting worse as he traveled closer to the core. But at last, he reached the closest mountain. Four chains shot out of **[Love's Bond]** and embedded themselves into the wall.

He dragged himself over and breathed out in relief after finding a spot somewhat protected from the turbulent water. The situation reminded Zac of those mountain climbers camping on the side of sheer cliffs as he hung from his chains while restoring his Miasma with a soldier pill and crystals. Normally he wouldn't have wasted a soldier pill in a place like this, but the Twilight Energy was just too powerful.

It was a negative spiral. The more Twilight Energy he failed to expel, the greater the suppression would be. And as he got weaker and weaker, he would eventually succumb to the environment. This was why people didn't push beyond their means in the Twilight Ascent, even for a quick sojourn to search for booty. There was no guarantee you'd make it back from even a half-day trip in an area your constitution couldn't handle.

Zac had one final ace he hadn't been forced to use to deal with the Twilight Energy just yet, but he was close to reaching

that point. For now, he kept making his way among the sharp cliffs, using his sharp eyes and high Luck to navigate the treacherous waters. He did see both caves and some promising spots that might lead into secluded valleys, but he chose to focus on his main task.

He could go searching for treasure as soon as he was rid of this suspicious egg and the brand hiding in his body.

Quite a few Beast Kings lived in the chasm, but they thankfully stayed inside their caves most of the time. The chasm itself was actually quite desolate because of the dangerous currents, and few plants could survive for long on the surface. Instead, every single mountain was a cornucopia of hidden spots with valuable treasures that had grown in seclusion from the currents or other outside interference.

Apparently, there were many secluded valleys like the one where they'd harvested the Life-Death Pearls, he just didn't have any way to find those spots except relying on dumb luck.

Zac had estimated his journey to take three days, but it took him over a week to follow the path lined out in his vision. Some time was wasted from avoiding Beast Kings emerging from their caves to hunt, but most of it was a matter of having to stop and focus on expelling Twilight Energy for a few hours to prevent any dangerous buildup.

A new problem appeared the moment he reached the spot. Zac frowned at the sheer mountain wall where the hidden tunnel should be. It was either real or an illusion so good it blended truth and falsehood to a perfect degree. Was the map wrong? It shouldn't be. Everything else matched his vision perfectly, except this wall, which should be a tunnel leading into a hidden valley inside the mountain.

A thought struck him, and he took out the sphere. His eyes lit up when the response was immediate; the wall fluctuated for a few seconds then disappeared. He still had no idea whether the wall had been real or fake as he passed through the tunnel. He guessed it didn't matter.

Soon enough he entered the valley, and a huge weight lifted off his shoulders. The density of Twilight Energy was

even lower here compared to the starting continent, and a small haze emerged from his pores as the large accumulations of toxins were expelled by [**Purity of the Void**]. Between one hidden node gobbling up the energy, and another expelling it, Zac figured he would be good to go within a few hours or so.

The altar stood in the center of the valley, just as advertised, but Zac only started to advance after having recovered to perfect condition. The procedure looked simple enough in the vision, Zac just wasn't as optimistic. Everything about this mission and this place was suspicious. For example, where did this altar and the inscriptions come from? Had someone built it? And what would happen when he placed the egg on it?

Chaos had gripped the whole trial, and it felt like the contraband he'd brought in here was, if not at the heart of it, then at least close. Which begged the question, what was Va Tapek doing with this thing? Catheya hadn't said anything during the month they traveled together after the events beneath the Living Pulse, but she was definitely troubled by the situation with her master. She was either an excellent liar or she really wasn't clued in on the situation.

It almost felt like Va Tapek was breaking with the Sharva'Zi Clan for whatever reason, joining a conspiracy that would potentially destroy one of their major revenue sources. And if he was, what did that mean for Catheya? Would she even have a master when she came out of this thing? He remembered her words back on Cork Island about chess pieces, and he really felt like one as he neared the altar.

There were no threats, and none of his early warning methods indicated any danger. Zac still gripped his axe nervously as he placed the egg on the center of the altar, but his danger sense didn't even have a chance to wake up before a pulse threw him off the steps. It didn't hurt, and Zac barely registered it as he looked at his right hand with glee.

The icy-blue brand appeared on the back of his hand again, and it emerged, starting to disintegrate into small ice crystals. Just as they were about to dissipate, they formed a simple sentence in the written script of the Undead Empire.

Such is balance restored and Karma severed.

“Balance, my ass,” Zac muttered. Va Tapek had only spoken a few words to the Veilplume Monarch, and he’d been sent on a trip to the most dangerous place in the Twilight Ocean.

If not for his bloodline, he would have been forced to train like his life depended on it for the whole trial before attempting to deliver this thing. Ultimately, complaining about Catheya’s master was futile. It was just another indignity he had to push to the back of his mind, just like all other lower-rung cultivators. Instead, he turned to the egg to see if it brought some change.

It sat silently on the podium for a few minutes, and then released the very same ripple as he’d seen in the vision. It felt like the whole realm beat with it as a few runes lit up around it. The pulse reverberated all the way to the depths of his bones. Curiously, he found he was neither harmed nor helped by it. The beat just passed through him, like an extremely deep bass.

However, there was one thing that changed from the pulse; **[Love’s Bond]** had woken up again. Alea hadn’t spoken a word after that short message back in the Hollowtongue Mountains, but the Spirit Tool woke up with a vengeance because of the egg. The whole coffin on his back hummed with intense desire, its hunger far eclipsing both the Twilight Fruits and Life-Death Pearls.

It even eclipsed the ardent craving Verun had shown toward that mysterious stone or the dragon’s blood back then. Four chains shot toward the egg without Zac doing a thing, driving home just how much Alea wanted the mysterious treasure. He might as well have been fighting four frenzied snakes as he commanded the chains back into the coffin.

“You really want this thing, huh,” Zac muttered as he looked at the stone in front of him.

It beat once more, causing another shudder to ripple through the valley. Zac waited for five minutes, watching the egg beat over and over, each ripple empowering itself and the

surroundings with a little bit more energy. Perhaps the treasure was charging itself from a drained state. And with each passing moment, the desire from **[Love's Bond]** increased.

Zac knew he was about to do something immeasurably stupid. He had to snatch it.

He'd searched high and low for over three years, and **[Love's Bond]** was extremely picky, not once having shown any interest before coming here. Twilight Harbor had been the only place holding things Alea needed, and none came close to this item. Who knew if he would ever find something like it again?

Alea was right at the precipice, and this might be the final key to the puzzle.

Doing so would definitely put him in harm's way. At the same time, the thought refused to leave once it had taken root. One by one the people around him had fallen since the integration. First was his dad, then Alea. Ogras, Billy, over a dozen Valkyries and followers in the hundreds. Even Thea had met her end, and he didn't know if he'd ever be able to see his sister again.

This egg quite literally represented a way for him to break the cycle. To at least bring one person back from the dead. And if he could do it with one, he felt more confident in helping the others. This opportunity didn't only provide a chance for him to evolve his Spirit Tool, it represented hope that his lofty goals weren't a fool's dream.

Besides, did stealing this weird object change anything? He was already planning on slinking away in the darkness like a bandit, using his human form as a disguise from Va Tapek and any other prying eyes. Why not go all out now that things had come to this point?

Zac came upon a problem as he jumped back onto the altar between heartbeats. He was completely unable to move the treasure now that it had been locked into place. Pulling with all the force he could muster didn't do a single thing, and **[Love's Bond]** was unable to absorb it while it was attached to

the altar. He found himself at an impasse, until he gained another idea.

“Brand it with your Mark of Creation, making it forever yours,” Zac whispered, his eyes glimmering with a mix of madness and determination.

REPERCUSSIONS

Zac was aware he wasn't thinking rationally, but his desires muffled the voice of caution in the back of his mind. The situation was just like when he found himself in front of the Dimensional Seed years ago, and the System told him to brand it. Back then, he'd trusted his instincts and ignored the quest. Today was different, and Zac felt using the Origin Mark to forcibly take control of the egg was worth a try. He could sense the mysterious energies that filled the runes of the egg and the runes on the altar were too vast for him to overpower, but he might be able to snatch it so long as he seized momentary control.

As to whether this messed up Va Tapek's or the Undead Empire's plans, Zac couldn't care less. That man had sent him on what might almost be considered a suicide mission. If anything, Zac felt he would end up carrying a ball of resentment if he *didn't* do something to mess with his plans. Besides, Zac guessed the Monarch had a bunch of contingencies in case this egg never reached this place. After all, Va Tapek must have believed Zac's reaching this hidden valley was a long shot at best.

Two streams of mental energy and Dao entered the weird pathways on his shoulders, and were soon joined by a mysterious intangible force that normally hid deep in his cells. A moment later, a small sphere full of endless potential appeared behind his hands, a small rune barely visible inside. Zac kept infusing it with energy until it stabilized while also instilling it with the purpose of why he was doing this.

Create an opportunity to steal the egg and have it become food for **[Love's Bond]**. Those thoughts and desires permeated the rune, and it subtly changed before Zac pushed it onto the egg. He sensed a slight resistance before the Origin Mark entered the smooth surface and disappeared. A shudder passed through the egg, and it spread into the array and out into the whole mountain.

Zac was just about to see if he could take it when a massive pulse threw him over thirty meters away and a storm of energy shot toward the sky from the altar. Millions of runes lit up all across the valley, and Zac found himself completely immobilized by a force far beyond what he could understand or endure. Unable to move, Zac stared at the spectacle with a mix of horror and awe.

Who created something like this? The tapestry that appeared among the walls spoke to the very core of Zac's soul, and he became awash with inspiration while his body was inundated with a terrifyingly concentrated force. **[Void Heart]** and his soul had been quiet since entering the secluded valley, but both woke up with a vengeance to greedily swallow the precious, raging energies.

Zac barely registered what was going on inside his body as his eyes darted back and forth, trying to imprint the vast schematic that appeared. The feeling was just like when he'd sat in front of the Big Boss' Big Wall, only on a far grander scale. Not only that, but the insights were related to Life, Death, and at least two other concepts he had no understanding of.

Was he looking at the blueprint of Twilight Energy, with all the insights that made it possible, open on display for him?

Zac wouldn't complain even if he found himself stuck here for a year. But too much of a good thing wasn't beneficial either. The levels of energy grew uncomfortable, and it felt like the whole valley had been turned into an enormous cauldron, where he was part of the impurities being burned away by the raging waves.

The chaos didn't stay contained to the valley either, but rather shot toward the surface, creating a pillar of force that had to be visible from far and wide. His tampering with the egg must have made the ancient preparations go haywire, and he was now paying the price.

The outburst only lasted ten seconds, but that alone was enough to fill him with enough energy to almost explode. As for the energy itself, it was fairly odd. It was Twilight Energy, yet it wasn't. Its base was the same, but purer, more primal in a sense. He wouldn't even be surprised if the odd thing inside him was the source of the Twilight Energy, which when mixed with Miasma and Cosmic Energy became the "lower" version that permeated the whole Mystic Realm.

The energy was filled with far more meaning than the original energy. Both his soul oceans were rapidly expanding and evolving, probably to a stage he wouldn't be able to reach with Twilight Energy alone. Zac grunted as he got back to his feet, a bit flummoxed that what should have been an opportunity for Alea somehow became an opportunity for himself.

He'd just evolved his two final Dao Fragments to Peak mastery with the help of the Life-Death Pearls, and had already gained another bout of inspiration. Most of the concepts he glimpsed on the runes were far beyond him right now, but they'd serve as a foundation to move toward forming his two branches.

Part of him really wanted to investigate the source of that amazing energy to see if he could siphon off any more. The scope of the spectacle, however, had set off warning signals in his mind. Such an outburst must have been seen or at least sensed from far and wide. He wouldn't be surprised if both Rankers and Beast Kings were making their way toward his location at this very moment.

Outbursts like this were often a sign of a great treasure having been born, and if he emerged from the cave, he would become a prime suspect. He needed to get away before that could happen.

Just not before trying to actually steal the egg. He flashed forward, appearing on top of the altar. The egg had once more calmed down and resumed its normal beat, with each beat illuminating a few more runes. Try as he might, he still couldn't dislodge the thing from its spot on the pedestal.

There was one change. Zac could actually sense his mark inside the egg. It hadn't been erased by the outburst, but had somehow fused with the treasure. With each beat, the Origin Mark released a minute ripple that probably wouldn't be discernible to anyone but him, generating a weak connection slowly forming between himself and the treasure.

His abyssal eyes looked at the egg with anticipation, knowing that not all hope was lost just yet. Who knew, he might be able to wrest control sooner or later after the Origin Mark had completely fused with the egg.

The question was how long that would take. For all he knew, it might take over a year. Zac gave the egg one last longing look before he jumped from the altar and ran toward the exit. This treasure was a big opportunity, but he needed to be alive to enjoy it. Who knew what problems could crop up if he remained. Better he leave now and deal with his other matters, and come back in a year or two when the situation had calmed down.

He rushed through the tunnel, relieved when there were no massive beasts waiting outside. He still activated [**Abyssal Phase**], moving thousands of meters from the cave mouth before the furious currents outside the secluded valley forced him back into his corporeal form.

Zac was about to continue when a terrifying pressure descend upon him. He turned around to see what was going on, and his eyes widened as a sanguine current ripped through the Twilight Chasm, heading straight for him. It was hundreds of meters long, practically crashing into the powerful currents in the chasm intentionally just because it could, crushing them with pure force.

An escape talisman appeared in his hand, and he sighed when it fizzled without activating. It was just a last-ditch

effort, since he'd already known this would happen. The energies were far too chaotic here, making it impossible for the talismans to connect two different spots in space.

He considered activating [**Abyssal Phase**] again, but he knew he wouldn't be able to get far even if he forced it. Besides, the blood river moved at impossible speeds, and had already reached him.

“Oh? A Draugr reeking of mysterious energies appearing just after the whole chasm was thrown into chaos? Just what have you done?” a curious voice said as a young woman emerged from the stream.

It was an otherworldly beauty who'd appeared in front of him, and of those he'd encountered in his whole life, her features perhaps only matched by Iz Tavn or Be'Zi. However, much like Be'Zi, her beauty was marred by a weird set of eyes where the sclera was red instead of white. She also had four small pupils instead of one, though Zac's own eyes widened a bit when the four pupils fused into one as she tilted her head.

A skill?

Her features were otherwise basically human, apart from her ears, which were slightly elongated and ended in a tip rather than a rounded bow. She emitted a graceful and even somewhat fragile aura, but Zac understood she was anything but. It barely looked like the rampant current had any effect on her at all thanks to a few thick bloody swirls that circulated around her, and the river she'd used to move through the chasm seemed more like a skill than a treasure.

Of course, the immensely powerful swirls of energy weren't the only clue of what kind of being stood before him. More poignant was the **100,000** above her head. It was even higher than the mothertree, let alone any other trial-takers. And he unfortunately had a pretty good idea whom he'd encountered.

“Reaver caught your tongue, Draugr?” The woman smiled.

“Mistress Noz'Valadir, I presume?” Zac sighed with a small bow. “It's an honor.”

“Such a gentleman,” she laughed. “Who are you?”

“I’m just a nobody who has come to the frontiers in search of opportunities.” Zac smiled, trying to figure a way out of this mess.

There were four portals leading out of Twilight Ocean just outside the chasm, all of them days away. Then again, they were no good even if he could reach them. There were still a few months before they would open to let people out of the Mystic Realm. And with his escape talismans not working, he would be hard-pressed to escape from this monster.

He could only pray that Uona Noz’Valadir wouldn’t attack another imperial.

“If you’re a nobody, then why is your bloodline even purer than any Heartland scion I’ve met?” Uona smiled. “My stomach is rumbling just from standing close to you. Are you a lineal descendant from the Abyssal Shores?”

“How could that be the case?” Zac said with a strained smile. The conversation had taken an extremely regrettable turn.

“Alright, whatever. It’s not surprising the Draugr have their eyes set on the opportunities in this quadrant. Tell me what happened here. I want the energy that’s coursing through your body, and I think you would prefer I take it from the source rather than from you.”

Zac wholeheartedly agreed, but he also couldn’t say the truth. The brand had disappeared, but who knew if the restrictions remained like an oath? What if he accidentally got himself killed by divulging the secrets. He could only mix some lies and truths and hope to get out of the situation in one piece.

“I was searching this mountain for opportunities when I felt an odd pulse from within. I tried to find a way inside since I figured it was something valuable, but the whole place was suddenly drowned in this energy to the point it almost killed me. I think someone got there first. They might even be

absorbing the treasure as we speak,” Zac said, hoping to send the vampire on a goose chase.

“Don’t play dumb with me,” Uona said, a chilling pressure starting to spread from her. Clearly, she was not so easily convinced. “I could sense the unique aura from ten mountains over, yet there is not a hint of it anywhere except on you right now. Did you already eat the treasure?”

“If I did, I wouldn’t be swimming around in these dangerous waters,” Zac said. “I would have secluded myself inside the mountain.”

“You’re either lying or useless then?” Uona sighed with disappointment. “Well, you might as well die.”

“Wait!” Zac shouted with alarm. “You must have come with the same goal as our people! We’re on the same side; we shouldn’t be fighting among ourselves when there are the Havarok to deal with.”

“Same side?” Uona snorted as she pointed at Zac. “There is only the side of the Eternal Clan. All else is cattle, that slippery bastard of a princeling included. Since you refuse to help, what good are you?”

Zac felt a sense of profound danger the next moment, and he immediately activated [**Profane Exponents**] as he started swimming for his life. The large barriers that he erected were instantly crushed by a tide of blood that rushed to ensnare him. Not even the Twilight Chasm was a match to its ferocity, let alone Zac’s own defenses.

It wasn’t just a matter of volume, though the enormous sanguine river was massive enough to drown the whole cage of [**Profane Seal**] in an instant if it so desired. It also contained extremely High-grade insights; insights which completely crushed his own Fragment of the Coffin. It was so far beyond what he’d felt when fighting Yanub Mettleleaf, to the point Zac guessed she’d not only infused the river with multiple Dao Branches, but also empowered them through some extremely powerful braiding method.

Perhaps she even used the Dao Arrays Catheya had once mentioned. Even worse, it was just like Catheya had guessed; Uona didn't appear any more restricted by the Twilight Energy than he did. At least, he hoped that was the case. If not, she was simply a terror at a level he'd only encountered in Iz Tayn.

Zac knew he was completely outmatched, but he obviously wasn't willing to just give up. He steadied his mind as he started channeling his Miasma into his movement skill. Meanwhile, he used the chains of **[Love's Bond]** to increase his speed by slamming into the mountain wall and dragging himself forward. The enormous river was still gradually catching up, and Zac was out of options.

The channeling completed, and he disappeared into a puff of energy, the world slowing down to a crawl. Painful currents ripped into his abyssal form, but Zac forcibly kept the skill going as he started creating more distance from the blood river. However, Zac only managed to increase the distance by a few hundred meters before his mind screamed of danger.

He didn't even get the chance to react before a lance of blood shot out of the river and pierced through his form with impossible speed. His whole body was set alight as he was forcibly dragged back into his normal state, and a wave of despair overcame him as he looked down at the stump where his right leg had once been.

A large trail of ichor was already forming behind him, and his vision threatened to close in. It was extremely lucky he'd only been hit in the leg rather than his heart or head. If he were less fortunate, he'd be a real corpse instead of just an undead.

But Zac suddenly heard a snicker within the blood river as it slowly crept closer, and it dawned on him – Uona was toying with him.

He didn't know why, but the snicker made rage overtake his dread, and he stopped swimming for his life. The Remnants' influence on his mental state had been mostly averted as his soul cultivation proceeded over the past years,

but the voices calling for destruction appeared in the back of his mind.

Perhaps it was because of the mockery. Perhaps it was because his body was in an agitated state after using the Origin Mark. And this time, Zac didn't try to push away the poisonous thoughts of destruction. Escape was clearly futile, so he had to change tactics.

If she wouldn't let him go, then she could just go ahead and die.

He wasn't someone she could toy with without getting burnt herself. Fury burned in his chest, fueling the torrential streams of energy that entered his shoulders. The goal wasn't to create a bridge between himself and the weird egg, but rather to annihilate that woman in one go.

The energy kept accumulating in his chest, and he kept it condensed inside his body as he kept moving away. The problem with the Annihilation Sphere was his difficulty to properly deliver the strike. Another spear shot out of the river, and it hit even after he tried to dodge. Zac gritted his teeth as he saw his left hand get dragged away by the current, forcibly keeping the process going even through the all-consuming pain.

Zac appeared right on top of the river thanks to the teleport of [**Profane Seal**], and a massive sphere formed between his right hand and his grisly stump as he felt a burning pain spread across his face and neck. He pushed every morsel of Annihilation Energy he'd accumulated in his soul into the red water and used his rage and pain as the fuse.

The response was immediate, as a huge chunk of it simply disappeared into an orb of nothingness while the rest of the river was pushed to a boiling point. It didn't even last for half a second before it collapsed, the blood swallowed by the currents, which had been kept at bay until now.

A bloodied form emerged from the water, her state even more pathetic than Zac's own. She was missing one of her arms along with a chunk of her torso, and she'd lost one whole leg to boot. Even the parts that avoided the Annihilation

Sphere were covered in weird cracks that complemented the tendrils of pain that spread from Zac's head down to his shoulders.

But she was still alive.

The four chains of **[Love's Bond]** shot toward weak spots for a quick kill, but Uona's closed eyes opened, staring at him with confusion, pain, and vengeance. Sanguine eyes met Zac's abyssal orbs, and the Twilight Chasm shuddered as an ocean of blood destroyed the mangled body of Uona and everything within a thousand meters.

Zac was right at the epicenter, and he only managed to resist for an instant before everything turned black.

CRUSHING PRESSURE

Searing pain woke Zac up with a start, and he found rampant energies wreaking havoc inside his body. It wasn't something Uona had done, but rather terrifying amounts of Twilight Energy. Far more than his bloodline could handle. Though his whole body was barely holding together from all the wounds, the energy was an even more immediate threat.

Perhaps he should consider it a relief that there was no kill energy occupying space inside his body. He had no idea how Uona managed to survive blowing herself up in an eruption of blood of such epic proportions, but she should barely be hanging on just like him from the state he'd left her in. Unfortunately, that was not much of a comfort as he found himself on the verge of succumbing to the environment.

No matter what he did, things only got worse inside his body. Zac tried to swim toward the surface, where the density should be lower. However, as he looked around to get his bearings, there was only darkness. Darkness so pervasive Zac feared he'd been blinded by that final explosion.

The world lit with color to an almost blinding degree when he activated [**Cosmic Gaze**], and Zac immediately understood what was going on.

Uona's self-destruct skill had knocked him out, and he'd been dragged God knows how far down into the depths by the currents. If the absolute lack of any light reaching this far below the surface was the first clue, then the terrifying amounts of Twilight Energy assaulting him was the second.

The density was multiple times more powerful than that of the surface of the Twilight Chasm. Dozens of times greater than other parts of the Twilight Ocean. This was way beyond what he could handle, even with his unique set of advantages. And that was when he was in prime condition.

Just a stump remained of his right leg, and his left hand stopped a bit after his elbow. His pathways were broken, and what little Miasma was left in his body moved turbidly through the storms of Twilight Energy ravaging his innards. Normally, losing all his Miasma would result in swapping over to his human side, but he wasn't sure he'd survive the transformation in his harried form.

He was running out of time, and his feeble attempts at swimming upward were completely futile. The currents were shockingly powerful, and new wounds kept appearing to add insult to injury. He needed to get out of this place, or at least find a spot to rest up and recover.

Zac was dizzy and nigh delirious, but he suddenly saw a spot of even more condensed darkness rapidly approach, and he knew that his chance had arrived. Five chains shot forward, each empowered by **[Blighted Cut]** to give them greater penetrative force. One, two, three chains were claimed by the currents before they reached their target, but two hit true and embedded themselves in the wall just as Zac was swept past the underwater mountain.

Sharp pain in his midriff cost him his consciousness for an instant as he was forced to a halt, but being blasted by the furious water didn't let him stay under for long. He arduously dragged himself to the wall, helplessly scanning for any caves or crevasses where he could take cover for just a bit.

There was none.

Zac refused to give in though, and **[Verun's Bite]** appeared in his hand as he frantically started carving a hole into the stone. Any rock that was placed this deep into the Twilight Chasm and still remained was bound to be extremely durable, and Zac barely managed to leave marks deeper than a

few centimeters even when going as hard as his condition allowed.

But he still refused to stop, and one chipping after another was claimed by the streams as he dug farther and farther into the mountain. After five minutes, he'd made a hole two meters deep, where the water was blessedly calm. This place allowed him to avoid the currents, but it didn't solve his predicament with the Twilight Energy.

But he had an idea.

He properly secured himself in the stone with every single chain before he took out a spare shield to block out the few streams finding their way into his crevasse. Only when he and his spot were secured did he take out the small array disk for **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]** with shaky hands.

The array hummed to life as Zac crammed a cocktail of Soldier Pills and healing pills down his throat, and he almost cried with relief as the insanely condensed Twilight Energies assailing him rapidly decreased in density. He felt a powerful drain of mental energy in his mind, and passively let the array siphon what it needed as he took stock of his situation.

He was in an absolutely horrid state, with deep lacerations covering his whole body. Even his pathways were damaged, not to speak of his missing limbs. For now, he could only bind a set of ropes around the stumps of his leg and arm to stem the loss of ichor as he focused on other issues.

The combination of pills and the array had at least allowed him to right the ship, albeit barely. **[Void Heart]** and **[Purity of the Void]** were fast at work dealing with the lethal levels of Twilight Energy that had already accumulated in his body. The real star was obviously the Life-Death Array.

Not only did it continuously swallow exorbitant amounts of Twilight Energy, but it also expelled huge amounts of Cosmic Energy. The array only wanted the attunement to empower the mental energy going into the array, and it expelled the actual energy into the surroundings.

It wasn't a great feeling to sit in the middle of a cloud of Cosmic Energy as an undead, but it was far preferable to Twilight Energy. The Cosmic Energy the array spat out didn't possess the weird ability to burrow into his body, and it essentially acted as a shield against the Twilight Energy in the surroundings.

Of course, the Twilight Energy was endless and pervasive, and it continuously kept swallowing up the Cosmic Energy he generated. However, Zac had no lack of Nexus Crystals, and he started continuously crushing Miasma Crystals to bolster the effect from his array. Those two actions together were just enough to keep the immediate Twilight Energy at bay to the point he was expelling more than he was forced to take in.

It was a continuous drain on his resources, but it provided him a stable environment as long as he kept the array running. There was enough Twilight Energy inside his body to kill ten Peak E-grade cultivators, and if not for his unusual bloodline, he would probably already have died before waking up in the depths.

His soul ocean on his undead side had already reached sublimation after swallowing the mysterious energy in the valley, which slowed down the purification process somewhat. The Soul-Strengthening Manual didn't need much of his attention though, and he managed to use some of his mental energy to start refining the Twilight Energy.

Twilight Energy was gradually turning into Miasma, which replenished his pitifully low stock, and he felt himself crawling away from the brink of death. Thirty minutes passed in this state of gradual recuperation until the first cycle of his soul-strengthening method ended. A storm of attuned mental energy came crashing back, filled with the power of the Mystic Realm itself.

The cultivation method was very much the same as before, so he'd started with his death-attuned side since he was in his Draugr body.

Doing so would slow and weaken the effect of the cultivation session compared to if he cultivated as normal,

infusing himself with death while living, and with life when dead. But that was exactly what he wanted in this situation. The less pressure he put on his mind, the better. The more time he could buy for himself, the better.

Still, a huge chunk of death-attuned mental energy poured into his soul aperture, and his deathly soul sea became even darker, starting to churn. The moment the first revolution ended, the ambient energy exploded back to full force, and Zac quickly activated the second rotation to give himself another breather.

This process continued for six whole hours, at which point the black ocean was veritably shaking with barely restrained might. It looked like it would swallow the life-attuned water and turn his soul into one vast ocean of the abyss, forcing Zac to continuously expend a large amount of mental energy to keep the ocean in its lane.

Seeing as the first half of the session was done, Zac changed his race after making sure he was firmly attached to the wall. A bout of weakness later, he found himself filled with life, but he was assailed by a wave of nausea from the large amount of deathly energies that filled his body. It came from **[Void Heart]**, which had operated at maximum during the cultivation session.

He'd tried to absorb or expel the runoff manually, but he obviously wasn't as efficient as his hidden node. It hadn't been a problem in his undead form, but now it was.

Still, there wasn't much to do about the situation, and Zac started working on expelling it as he activated the second round of soul cultivation. The density of Twilight Energy decreased, and some of that leftover death-attuned energy was swallowed by the **[Void Heart]** while some more was expelled by **[Purity of the Void]**.

The minutes ticked on, and soon enough the energy had passed through the small array, bringing with it a surge of vivacious mental energy. It entered the golden ocean, and its churning water rose and started to push back the deathly ocean. The waves crashed against each other, creating a small

tremor in his mind, as his shimmering Soul Core was placed in the heart of the conflict.

One round after another had the battle increasing in ferocity. Waves were soon tall enough to completely submerge the Soul Core. His soul aperture was fast becoming a chaotic storm of life and death. All the while, Zac felt his soul being polished.

That was not the only change. While some of the imperfections were being sanded off by the chaos, it also looked like the waters left something behind. Some sort of fine sand was brought from the depths of the oceans up into the waves, and a few of those barely discernable motes of energy landed on the Soul Core and melded with it.

Altogether, it looked like the session added a bit more than it removed, though just barely. It wasn't too surprising. It was his first proper soul cultivation session since he evolved his soul, and he hadn't done anything to empower the process. Besides, Zac figured the number of impurities that were removed after each session would decrease over time as his soul became more perfected, which would lead to a greater effect.

Unfortunately, Zac found himself in a worrying situation as the cultivation session was drawing to an end. The ambient energy would return to its terrifying density, and Zac would once more find himself overwhelmed. Doing another round of soul cultivation was impossible, and it was also impossible to activate the array without actually connecting to it with his mind.

His hours of hard work expelling all that accumulated energy would soon be undone unless he did something, but he had already found the solution. Another Supreme Nexus Crystal appeared in his hand, and he crushed it before the Twilight Energy had a chance to rush back. The whole area was drowned in dense waves of Cosmic Energy, though not quite as dense as when the Soul Strengthening Array was also helping.

The first time he tried this method, it worked for almost half an hour, and he had crushed one a minute while running the array. This time the relief barely lasted ten seconds before the Twilight Energy gobbled it all up. Zac crushed a second crystal, and the Twilight Energy was again pushed back.

There were few, if any, E-grade cultivators who had the financial strength to burn almost five thousand E-grade Nexus Coins every minute, but he'd thankfully stocked up on a small mountain of crystals before entering the trial. After all, he had no idea if he would have the chance to purchase another round after he left the Twilight Ascent. But even his stock wouldn't last the whole trial going at this rate.

Zac knew all too well that not even he could stay down here forever.

There was one more thing he needed to do before he set off. He looked down at his left leg ending just above his knee, and he gritted his teeth as he loosened the rope keeping it closed. A layer of skin had already appeared over the wound thanks to his crazy Vitality, and Zac said a silent prayer as he cut off a thin slice with **[Verun's Bite]**.

The water turned red, but Zac staunchly kept his focus as he crushed another Supreme Nexus Crystal before he roused the slumbering Creation Energy. For this purpose, there wasn't even any need to create an Origin Mark, he just watched as a new leg rapidly regenerated to replace the missing one.

The pain of growing a limb was excruciating, but no more so than many other wounds he'd suffered over the past years. It wasn't enough for him to lose his focus, and he kept picturing how his legs looked. He'd known this situation would happen sooner or later and memorized every last part of his body, both through scanning himself and by using **[Spiritual Anchor]**.

He remembered every hair, every pore, just so that he would be able to recreate them without any aberration. Soon enough the foot was added, and Zac was hit by a wave of weakness. Unfortunately, it was not the weakness of needing sleep, but rather something more sinister.

He had again lost a good chunk of his longevity.

Zac couldn't be certain, but he guessed that he'd lost a few decades re-forming his leg, which didn't feel too dreadful now that he'd reached D-grade race. Still, that was only one of two limbs missing, and he sighed as he turned toward his missing left hand.

Regrowing his left hand wasn't necessarily needed to get out of this place, and his combat effectiveness wasn't contingent on having it either. Needing to regrow it was rather a matter of his pathways. He was already disadvantaged as a mortal, and now with his pathways broken in two places, his energy was completely turbid, making dealing with the Twilight Energy all that much harder.

He also had skill fractals on his left arm. Luckily, skill fractals were protected by the System, and they would be back as soon as his spirit body recovered. However, he wouldn't be able to use them until his hand regrew.

The process repeated, and he barely had enough Creation Energy to complete it. With him having used his Annihilation Energy on Uona, he was completely tapped out for this hidden ace. He would either have to wait a few months to gather more energy or forcibly open his cage again if he wanted to make use of the two powers of the Remnants.

His limbs successfully regrown, but he still rested another three hours at the cost of a small hill of Nexus Crystals. Only then did he feel his state stable enough to leave. His crystals would run out before the trial ended, and there was only one way to go. He steeled himself as he slowly made his way out of the small alcove.

The chains of [**Love's Bond**] were still firmly embedded in the stone, and Zac still almost found himself dragged farther into the depths the moment he was exposed to the torrential water. He ignored the pain as he started pulling himself up, moving meter by meter along the rock with the help of his chains.

Progress was slow, as he was climbing against the current. The chains were barely able to rise against the downward

pressure, and there were barely any footholds for him to utilize with his own hands and legs. Swimming was out of the question. The second he let go of the wall, he would be dragged to the depths.

Zac only managed to climb one hundred meters or so before he felt himself approaching his limits, and he started to cut another dugout. A minute later, he'd created another safe zone, and blocked the pathway as best he could before he started up the costly process of keeping the ambient energy at bay.

This cycle of short climbs and long durations of rest kept going for over ten hours, at which point he was ready for another round of soul cultivation. He made decent progress this time, climbing over a kilometer along the cliff wall. The strategy worked well enough, but he worried a bit about his prospects. The water above him was utterly pitch-black, making him wonder just how far down he'd been dragged.

It wasn't like he couldn't stomach the cost, but he was burning almost five hundred Supreme Nexus Crystals between each climb, and he only had so many. The real issue was the mountain he was climbing. All his plans were contingent on the mountain actually reaching all the way up, but there were no guarantees that was actually the case. If it abruptly ended before he'd climbed to a point where the currents weren't powerful enough to drag him back to the depths, he'd be screwed.

Two days passed, and Zac made increasingly greater progress as his climbing technique steadily improved. It was still infuriatingly pitch-black above his head, but the energy density was slowly decreasing. He could go a little bit farther with each climb, and the rest periods cost a little bit less.

He believed that sooner or later he'd reach a depth where he would barely be able to hang on with just his Soul Strengthening Array and hidden nodes, perhaps using the occasional crystal to tide him over. That would be the optimal place to hone his soul, easily fulfilling the harsh requirements on cultivation environment.

Who knew, he might even complete the second reincarnation in one go thanks to the unique environment of the depths of the Twilight Chasm. If he ever got out of this place, that is.

MOUNTAIN FORMATION

The situation was grim, but it wasn't all bad. Where there was danger and also opportunity. Zac's cells came alive with greed while climbing, and he spotted a secluded cave not far away. He entered cautiously after switching to his undead form, he found himself face-to-face with a flower that had one juicy bulb at the top that reminded Zac of a dumpling.

It emitted an extremely enticing earthy aroma, and Zac firmly ignored his primal hunger as he took out a jade box and harvested it. His best guess was that it was some sort of native Dao Treasure, judging by the aura it emitted, one of a far higher quality than the Life-Death Pearls.

It was definitely a treasure valuable enough to match anything a top five hundred contestant on the Fate-Plucking Ladder would be able to get from the vault, perhaps something even greater. Using it now was too risky considering he'd been out of it for twenty days when ingesting the first round of Life-Death Pearls. Even passing out for an hour in this place might prove lethal.

Unfortunately, his grand plan hit a sudden and unexpected turn a day later. He'd reached the peak of the mountain and was still far from the surface. In fact, it looked like the mountain had been broken off by the turbulent water, and turned into a mostly flat plateau a few kilometers across.

Swimming to the surface was still not an option. If anything, the currents were even stronger right at the summit, and Zac was forced to climb down some ways to not risk getting ripped off the mountain. Zac needed to find another

mountain, but he couldn't see any from his vantage. Worst-case scenario, he would have to descend until he found another one it connected to, but that could potentially waste weeks, if it was even possible.

There was one more thing he could do, and Zac spent two days traversing the side of the plateau until he spotted another mountain far in the distance.

The problem was the vast chasm between him and the target. Zac mulled on the conundrum while performing another cleansing soul-strengthening cycle, after which he dug a larger-than-normal cave. It took a whole hour before he was finished, at which point he took out a large conic stone.

It came from one of the Spatial Rings of the cultivators he took out just before leaving Greengrove Archipelago, and would become the sacrifice for this endeavor. He entered the vessel and thoroughly studied it before he loaded the array full of Supreme Nexus Crystals. Zac took a deep breath before he cranked the speed-controlling array to the limit.

The vessel shot out like a bullet from Zac's makeshift dock, hurtling straight for the taller mountain across the abyss. Steering was out of the question since he'd completely overtaxed the array far beyond what it could sustain for long.

Ominous groans started to echo through the hull, even with the shields working at max capacity. A tremendous shudder made Zac lose his footing a moment later as a large section of the hull was sheared clean off. Thankfully, he'd made it more than three-quarters across the chasm before the ship was ripped apart, and he was confident he'd be able to swim the last stretch.

However, he'd severely underestimated just how strong the currents were, and found himself rapidly dragged downward as he inched toward the peak. The amount of Miasma he was expelling to propel himself would be enough to drown out an army of F-grade warriors, but it wasn't a match to the intractable power that wanted to drag him to the depths.

Zac started to despair that days of effort would be wasted, and he might not even make it across. Suddenly, the

downward pull was completely gone, allowing him to scramble toward the mountain. But Zac almost forgot to keep swimming as he glanced upward to see what was going on.

Something was swimming a few hundred meters over his head, its body stretching on for thousands of meters. Zac couldn't see exactly what it was. He could barely discern dark-green scales, each one as large as a football field, by the looks of it.

What was this thing? And what was it doing in an E-grade trial? This big bastard would make even the dragon he'd fought look like a little shrimp. He wasn't even sure the mountain he'd been climbing had been broken off by the currents any longer. This guy would only need to ram it once to get the work done.

Zac was frozen in fear for only a second before he continued swimming toward the mountain, using as much energy as he dared without causing too large a ripple. The creature seemed completely disinterested in Zac, and he reached the mountain just in time before the thing passed him by.

In its wake came a tumultuous storm, and Zac barely managed to hold on to the cliff wall. His body was instantly covered in cuts, and he was forced to chisel a cubby to rest again. Meanwhile, the monstrosity was only passing by the area, and it rounded the mountain Zac first climbed before it sank toward the depths.

He never saw its face, but the beast best resembled some sort of overgrown sea snake since it neither had the fins of fish or wings and claws of a dragon. It was just an oversized tube ripping through the chasm, its massive trunk of a body turning the streams chaotic.

Zac rested up with his Soul-Strengthening Manual while keeping watch. The gargantuan beast never made another appearance. Perhaps it lived even farther down in the depths and only made the rounds now and then. Zac even guessed that thing was the true ruler of the Twilight Chasm, even though it hadn't been mentioned in any missive.

It was far beyond any normal Beast King, to the point Zac suspected it might be approaching Monarchy. Why such a thing existed inside the Mystic Realm was beyond Zac, and he could only endeavor not to draw its ire.

Zac started climbing again, finding himself in a predicament after another two weeks. The section he'd found himself in was a cluster of fifty-odd peaks, with the cliff he started on being slightly separated from them. He managed to swim between these cliffs without sacrificing any more vessels, but it soon became apparent that most of these mountains didn't reach much farther than the original one.

He'd discerned what looked to be a much larger cliff or perhaps even the wall of the chasm, but the way there was extraordinarily perilous. Not only was the distance almost four times as great between the closest peak and his earlier jump, but the streams were extremely powerful. He wasn't confident at all in making it across without the big snake helping out.

And even if he made it across in one piece, it was possible he would also be dragged to such a depth that his methods to deal with the Twilight Energy wouldn't be enough.

Still, what else could he do?

He would have to take the leap sooner or later if he wanted to get out of here, but he didn't go immediately. The peaks were drenched in energy, and there were bound to be some treasures. As long as he could make some sort of breakthrough, he'd increase his chances of survival when making it across. He set out, but it was easier said than done finding anything down here.

For one, it was pitch-black, and his other sights could only help him see so far. He spent one day per mountain peak, climbing around as much as he could in search of energy fluctuations or anything else to indicate a valuable. And on the sixth day, he found something. It wasn't a precious metal, nor was it a unique plant hidden in a crevasse. It was a pristine, five-meter-long bone that had been lodged in a crack.

Zac guessed it had been brought there by the currents rather than a beast that lived down here. Twilight Energy this

dense was no doubt poisonous to normal Beast Kings as well. The bone was stuck in the middle of an extraordinarily powerful stream, and that was one reason why Zac believed it might be a treasure.

A normal bone even from a D-grade beast would have been ground to dust in a situation like this, but this one seemed to have no issue withstanding the cutting water.

In fact, it almost looked like the water was refining it. Zac had his suspicions, but he was currently in his human form, so he couldn't be sure. He was trying to use the intuition gained by **[Forester's Constitution]** to find herbs, but he swapped over to his Draugr side after some thought as he hid from the stream in a secluded crevasse.

As expected, the moment he trained his abyssal eyes on the bone, he was almost blinded by the immense life-attuned energies it contained. The bone lit up like a beacon in the darkness. It was clear; the bone was somehow storing a bit of the life-attuned energies of the water that passed while expelling some of the deathly energies.

Over who knows how many years, the bone had become a Treasure Bone of Pure Life. Zac wanted to head over and pick it up, but he first had to spend the next hour cracking Miasma Crystals and expelling built-up energy. Only then did he move, but he was surprised to find the chains of **[Love's Bond]** weren't strong enough to dislodge the thing.

Zac wasn't deterred, and he moved to plan B. The chains of **[Love's Bond]** slammed into the mountain wall or wrapped around a few outcroppings before he crawled over, securely fastened. Three small pygmies appeared in the water behind him, but cracks immediately started to spread across their bones.

The skill would only last a few seconds before the surrounding energies ripped the skeletons apart, but that was enough. One barrier after another appeared to slightly divert the powerful current surrounding the bone, making it slightly easier for Zac to climb over. The bone had essentially fused

with the mountain itself. No wonder the chains had been unable to drag the bone over.

But the strength of nature was nothing in front of the power of Zac's greed, and he ripped it and a section of the mountain straight out of the crack with a herculean tug. He dragged himself back with the chains just as **[Profane Exponents]** crumbled. The bone entered his Spatial Ring, and Zac wasn't all that surprised when he felt a wave of hunger in his mind.

Verun had woken up inside the ring, and it clearly indicated a desire to consume the mysterious bone. This was exactly what Zac had hoped for when snatching the Treasure Bone, but he didn't let Verun feed on it just yet. The axe wasn't really needed to solve his current predicament, but he couldn't let it absorb the bone right now.

Previously when Verun got something good, it enclosed itself in large crystals to digest it, and this was no time for that.

Instead, he continued, and found three extremely impressive materials over the next two weeks. One was a metal that emitted intense energy fluctuations, yet wasn't listed in any of the precious materials missives. It had to be something extraordinarily rare for that to be the case, and rare items were always good to have.

Neither of his Spirit Tools wanted it, but he might be able to use it to trade for something he needed in the future. After all, the absolute rarest items were scarcely possible to buy with Nexus Coins alone, and many warriors preferred straight-up trades of similarly exotic materials.

He also found another one of those odd dumpling-like fruits, this one slightly larger compared to the first. He still wasn't certain whether it was a Dao Treasure or something else. His best bet was showing them to Catheya to see if she knew what they were.

The last ones were stalks of reed-like grass swaying in a secluded spot protected from the more powerful currents. Zac had almost been dragged out to the depths when he gazed upon them since their sway had an extremely potent

hallucinogenic effect. It was only thanks to his evolved soul he barely regained his sanity and desperately scrambled back to the mountain before he was swept away.

Harvesting them had been a challenge with him being constantly hypnotized, but the closer he came to them, the more he could sense they would have an amazing effect on nurturing one's soul. They were his best find so far, and he planned on simply eating them unless he found something more promising to help him out.

However, he suddenly spotted something extremely mysterious, something that smelled of opportunity. Zac was climbing a mountain as usual, when there was suddenly a weird fluctuation in the distance. A whole mountain flickered into existence before disappearing in just a few seconds. It was almost like he'd seen a mirage, but he could soon confirm it was real.

He wouldn't have noticed anything if he hadn't seen the mountain for a brief window. Now that he knew it was there, he could see how the powerful currents swirled around it. It wasn't phasing in or out of reality, but rather shrouded by some unknown method. Zac frowned as he looked around at the mountain peaks, realizing the hidden mountain was right in the middle of the cluster he was currently exploring.

A natural formation?

He dug a cubby and started up another round of soul cultivation, keeping watch over the secret peak. The mountain reappeared twice in a span of ten hours, and was preceded by a mounting surge of energy each time. There was also a hint of spatial energy in the mix, making Zac wonder if space was sealed, but a weakness appeared every once in a while.

If he wanted to enter the mountain, it would probably have to be in that brief window. Zac already decided over the past hours to take his chances and enter that place. The soul grass he'd harvested was nice, but not enough to reach his second reincarnation. Absorbing them wasn't sufficient to give him the power to reach the wall of the chasm. He needed to take a risk and check things out.

Zac made his preparations over the next day, ignoring the mountain as it appeared four more times. Soon enough, he shot out in another of his spare vessels, this one having over a hundred talismans plastered to its hull. That was the limit of what he could activate without completely draining himself. The vessel was lit up like a sun as it pierced through the frantic currents just as the energy of the hidden peak started to surge.

The whole ship shook and started to fall apart as it slammed into an unseen barrier. Zac was ready. Only a third of the talismans had been defensive ones to deal with the current without the ship crumbling, and the rest simultaneously lit up to create a tremendous explosion, and was quickly followed by a massive axe cutting through the water.

It was [**Arcadia's Judgment**], and not even the terrifying pressure of the ocean could withstand the wooden hand as it ripped open a tear in an unseen shield. A patch of flowers appeared beneath Zac's feet as he shot forward, passing right by his own attack and forcing himself through the temporary weakness in the natural formation.

He expected to find the mountain he'd seen on the other side, but his eyes widened in terror when he was actually met with a chaotic storm of spatial energies. He didn't even have a chance to orient himself before his surroundings twisted. Thankfully he hadn't been swallowed by the void, but rather transported to some unknown cave.

The cave was drained, and Zac took a deep breath with wonder as he looked around. The ground was littered with all kinds of things that had been dragged here just like himself. There was everything from ancient corpses, cultivators and beasts alike, to large chunks of metal and soil.

In fact, the materials here were even more plentiful than all he'd gathered himself so far. Unfortunately, there was something odd going on. The older materials seemed to have been drained, including an identical piece of metal to the one he'd found the other day.

As for the culprit for that and his getting dragged here, there was one clear suspect—the flowers.

They were the only thing that seemed to grow naturally in the cave, and they absolutely covered both ceiling and walls. Their alluring aroma was simply amazing, and that was the least impressive thing about them. The density of Twilight Energy was pitifully low in this place, to the point Zac wouldn't even need to use his Soul Strengthening Array to get by.

There was only one way something like this was possible; these flowers were continuously swallowing exorbitant amounts of energy, enough to drain the whole area to the point that only a trickle remained. They were even so voracious, they somehow dragged materials from the outside to be absorbed.

Then again, it wasn't certain that these flowers actually swallowed all the energies themselves. Intense spatial fluctuations were coming from this place, making Zac wonder if these flowers had formed some sort of natural formation that sent the Twilight Energy to the Void just like they'd teleported him and all these materials here.

He walked over to the closest one and inspected it. He felt like he could discard any theory that the spatial fluctuations came from some other source. The flowers themselves held extremely condensed powers of space, and miniature cracks appeared in space when Zac brushed one of its petals.

The movement increased the fluctuations by another tier, and Zac's body woke up, greedily swallowing the released energy. He had no idea what species of flower he was looking at, and his missive couldn't help him either. However, he could tell with absolute certainty that whatever these flowers were called, they worked wonders on his constitution.

Zac had found it. He'd found the opportunity to make another breakthrough, and it was one he'd been holding back on for a long time now.

It was time to push his bloodline to E-grade.

LIMITLESS

Evolving his bloodline was risky considering the chaos he caused when awakening it the first time, but he didn't have much choice if he wanted to get out of here. It was either that or wait in this cave until the trial ended. This place was safe enough with the flowers eating all the Twilight Energy, but he refused to sit around for over two whole years.

Besides, wasn't this the perfect opportunity? There shouldn't be a single cultivator able to reach these depths, and he hadn't even seen any beasts except that monstrous snake. Meanwhile, there were dozens of peaks all around him, many no doubt containing extremely valuable treasures he was simply unable to find.

Along with the absurd amount of ambient energy in the Twilight Chasm, he had the perfect stage to break through, no matter how much energy his bloodline demanded.

He needed to make some preparations before taking that step though, and started setting up a series of arrays in the middle of the cave. It wasn't the usual illusion and isolation arrays he used when arranging a temporary cultivation cave, but rather protective arrays. Last time he'd formed a huge vortex, and he was afraid of dropping the mountain above him right on his head if he didn't think things through.

That was why he arranged two layers of protection. One offensive array to blast a large hole in the rock above his head in case a section fell toward him, and another to block any errant debris.

He also started digging through the stone with **[Love's Bond]**, having all four of his free chains entrench themselves in downward, spiraled patterns to secure him in place. The cave didn't seem connected to the ocean outside, but there were no guarantees that would still be the case if that vortex Ogras had described appeared again.

After that, Zac wasted no time, and the **[Cardinal Kernel]** appeared in his hands. His cells were already agitated from the flowers around him, and Zac's hands even started shaking from barely constrained hunger as he cut a small wound in his hand and let his blood drip on the dark-green crystal before he firmly gripped it.

The natural treasure hummed to life as it went from green to red, and Zac found a stream of primal energy entering his veins. His heart started to furiously beat like a war drum, and the energy spread through his whole body.

His body greedily sucked more and more energy out of the crystal, causing the air to twist around the heart-shaped treasure. Eventually, it cracked, completely drained by the Void Emperor bloodline. Zac wasn't satiated at all though, and felt a familiar state of madness brought on by hunger coming over him.

This time he wasn't completely out of his mind thanks to his strengthened soul, but he still started to greedily chow down on the hundreds of fruits he'd found just a few weeks before. Each one contained so much energy, it would take a normal E-grade cultivator weeks to refine, but the energy had all been absorbed by his cells before the fruits even reached his stomach.

The more he ate, the more voracious the hunger became. He could feel it. He was still incomplete, and just like last time, the promise of perfection loomed out of reach. He was approaching the tipping point, and he pushed away any final misgivings as he swallowed one fruit after another, madness and desire burning in his eyes.

Something far away cracked, and Zac's vision started to blur. He first tried to fight it, but his mind was swiftly

wrenched away. The last thing he sensed was tens of thousands of gates appearing in the area, each of them taking everything from their surroundings.

He had once more become the void.

“I’m here to help clean up,” Karz said demurely without lifting his gaze from the ground.

“Ah! Gar—eh, Karz, is it?” the quartermaster coughed. “Well, chambers two, fourteen, and twenty-eight will need cleaning today.”

Karz’s heart beat an extra time when hearing he’d been assigned to a single-digit chamber, and number two at that. This would be a pretty big haul. He controlled his aura and expression as he headed for the inner parts of the Alchemy Hall. Thanks to months of building his “reputation,” he passed straight through the security checks without causing any waves, gaining access to an area that not even Inner Disciples could enter.

The scheduling formation indicated that chambers fourteen and twenty-eight would open in an hour or so, while chamber two was more imminent. Karz walked over to the finely decorated waiting hall and sat down in a corner where he wouldn’t be in the way. Even then, his appearance caused some ruffles. Two cultivators looked at him with deep frowns.

He recognized one to be a Core Disciple of the Alchemy Hall, but the other woman was unknown to him. However, Karz guessed she had already completed her body tempering and entered the Profound Realm, judging by her aura. She was young, making Karz believe her to be some talent among the Core Disciples.

“Who is that?” the woman said with a disgusted tone, and Karz could tell she wasn’t really trying to hide her voice. “I can smell him even through the medicinal aroma.”

“Oh, right, you just came back. I don’t know his name, but he’s called Garbage,” the other voice answered. “An elder found him in the garbage heaps last year and took pity on him. I heard he actually has a Heavenly Affinity barely high enough for him to target Inner Discipleship, but there’s something wrong with his head. He’s obsessed with refuse and is more interested in collecting and disposing of it than cultivating. It’s kind of convenient though, so people let him do his thing. He’s managing the refuse for most Core Disciples and even some elders.”

“Should have left someone like that among the trash,” the first speaker spat as they walked around a corner. “A lowly person will always stay lowly.”

“You’re right. Do you know what a disciple saw when they spied into his courtyard? He actually...” the other cultivator said before the voice got indistinguishable from the distance.

Karz had heard it all before. There wasn’t a single ripple in his heart. He knew he was despised, but what did he care? In fact, it made his goals easier. And if there was one thing he knew to be true in this world, it was that her decree was fundamentally and irrevocably wrong. The only certain thing was change.

However, he couldn’t help but snort at how naïve he’d been before, back when he scavenged for scraps a few years ago. Old Vek had talked about the cultivators as though they were some sort of celestials, full of poise and grace. But coming here, he’d realized the truth.

In some ways, they were even dirtier than the scavengers on the ground.

Subterfuge, backstabbing, playing little games to mess with each other simply to pass the time. They were just mortals who became increasingly cruel and twisted as their powers grew. They were bound by conventions, fettered by things such as honor and reputation as surely as if they were trapped by real fetters.

They didn’t understand true desperation. The hunger that pushed you into a fight to the death against another scavenger

all for a rotten carcass. They saw him as lowly—he saw them as foolish. He soon threw that woman out of his mind as he eagerly waited for the door to open.

A dense cloud of medicinal aroma wafted out of the chamber as the thick gates swung open, and his pores opened and greedily swallowed as much as they could without exposing his secret. Following the aroma, a young man appeared, wearing an even more exquisite robe compared to the woman before.

His appearance didn't match his clothes. His hair was in disarray, and his eyes were completely bloodshot and glazed over. He still stopped and refocused when he saw Karz sitting outside.

“It's you,” the young man said with surprise.

Karz knew who this was: Laondio Evrodok. He wasn't surprised this man had been allowed to use the second refinement chamber, the second greatest cultivation chamber except for the one the Supreme Elder used for his experiments. In fact, Karz heard that chamber two had recently been upgraded to surpass chamber one, all for this man.

If Karz was at the absolute bottom of the totem pole, to the point people actually called him Garbage, then Laondio Evrodok was his polar opposite. The ragged-looking man was the greatest genius the sect had ever seen in its four-million-year history, and not by a small degree.

He was being personally groomed by both the Sect Leader and the two Supreme Elders. Many hoped he would be the one to move their mountain to even greater heights. His talents were so great, a Herald from the upper realms would descend in a few years to try him out. In a few centuries, he might be a Herald himself, ruling over the mortal realms like a god.

“I'm just here to clean,” Karz said.

“Here.” Laondio grinned as he took out a vial containing a few pills. “A small thank you. Your service is appreciated, but you cannot forget your own cultivation.”

“What’s this?” Karz asked as he looked at the weirdly shaped pills.

“My latest recipe. It’s an impurity-cleansing pill! I call them **[Pure as Laon]**!” the man said with pride.

“Is it as good as the **[Turbulent Wind Pill]**?” Karz asked, slightly excited by the gifts. Those kinds of pills would save him a lot of time.

“Well, no, it’s much worse.” Laondio coughed, making Karz’s eyes dim a bit. “But it’s cheap! It costs just a fraction of those exorbitant pills.”

“Oh?” Karz hesitantly said.

Laondio was clearly not satisfied with the lukewarm response. “Think about it! What separates the haves and have-nots in the world?”

“Resources,” Karz said without hesitation.

“Exactly!” Laondio said, his dry eyes lighting up with excitement. “It’s resources! The wealthy cultivators get to eat the greatest Heavenly Treasures and cultivate closest to the purest Dragon Veins. Meanwhile, those with lower stature are bound to struggle on the road of cultivation. Impurities will accumulate from absorbing the Earthly Qi, and even the greatest geniuses will find their road to cultivation cut short because of providence rather than effort.

“This is the first step to even the playing field. A cheap pill to help those with nothing to fall back on break through the chains of fate, to make anyone’s potential limitless!” the Alchemist explained. Karz’s eyes widened as he felt the air around the young man twist like his conviction was imposing its will on the Heavenly Laws.

“I heard you grew up on the ground? Your body must have absorbed a lot of Earthly Qi while living outside the protection of the Dragon Veins. This will hopefully help put you back on course,” Laondio continued.

“Why are you giving me this?” Karz hesitantly asked.

“I heard how much you have helped people around here. This is just a small token of thanks,” Laondio said before he walked away.

The gesture was nice, but ultimately superfluous. Ever since that weird spot in his back had burst open, he’d continuously rid himself of the taint. In the beginning, it was to the point that his sweat was a disgusting black ooze. By now his situation was mostly fine. In fact, he believed his constitution would have been a lot better compared to even Core Disciples if not for his nightly activities.

Karz scurried into the room and beheld the piles of discarded flowers, stems, shells, and other leftovers from Laondio’s Alchemy session. He briefly wondered if the young star would be as generous with his pills if he knew it wasn’t selflessness that drove Karz’s actions, but rather greed.

The rest of the cultivators on this mountain might see a bunch of worthless scrap, but Karz saw something even better than the Origin Pills that were distributed every month to Outer Disciples such as himself.

He put all the scraps into his bag of holding before he carefully cleaned the whole room, putting everything back to where it was supposed to belong. He didn’t really care about this part, but saw it as payment for the valuable materials he collected. An hour later, he’d spruced up the other two Alchemy chambers as well, and left the inner sections of the Alchemy Hall.

“Thank you, young man,” the quartermaster smiled as she furtively looked around. When she saw no one was looking, she handed him a bound parchment. “This is for you. It’s the entry-level fire-control technique we teach Inner Disciples. If you master the methods to control the flame, you can become a proper assistant who gets paid by the sect for your hard work. You could even become an Alchemist if your Heavenly Root allows for it.”

“Thank you,” Karz said with surprise as he quickly stowed away the method.

An entry-level technique wasn't much compared to the top methods the sect possessed. Still, the quartermaster had bent the rules a bit in his favor by providing this.

"I will work hard to learn this method."

"Don't worry if you can't master it," the quartermaster said. "Alchemy is a grand path, but it's ultimately not for everyone. Even if this one doesn't suit you, I'm sure someone hardworking like you will find another one."

"Thank you." Karz bowed before he started his trek down from the Alchemy peak.

It was unfortunate. Kindhearted people like the quartermaster would never reach the Peak in cultivation. Her advancement opportunities would be stolen through backroom deals of less open-hearted cultivators, and she'd be stuck as lower management even if her talent indicated she should rise higher.

After talking with Laondio, Karz was a bit conflicted. He'd considered the ruthless struggle for treasures and methods Heavenly Law, but was that really an absolute? Were there no better ways than everyone clawing for every advantage they could get? Or was the young genius simply a dreamer with his head in the clouds after never having encountered any real hardships?

Ultimately, it didn't matter. Karz was far better off now compared to his years in the trash heaps, but he still didn't feel much closer to the "glorious life in the sky" he'd dreamed of before. As his power grew, so did his vantage. It even felt like the mountain he was trying to climb to the peak was growing even quicker than he was.

It was only last month he learned of exalted existences called Void Heralds, cultivators who'd broken through to unimaginable heights. These kinds of beings didn't even exist in the sect or the neighboring clans for that matter. And that still wasn't the peak. Cultivation was really without end.

Karz returned to his secluded domicile. Seeing the sprawling walls would probably confuse any visitor to the

sect. What kind of Outer Sect Disciple got such a huge courtyard when space on the mountain was limited, even if it was almost by the foot? However, if they stepped inside, they'd soon understand why a place like this existed.

It almost felt like entering another world when he passed through the gates to his home. The dense Spiritual Energy outside had been slashed by more than three-quarters, barely any better than what you'd see down on the tainted ground. And what little ambient energy remained was oddly tainted for being so close to a Dragon Vein.

So what if the place was big? Any cultivator who lived in a courtyard like this was essentially crippling their cultivation.

Karz didn't understand the specifics. An elder had called it a "fault line" of the Dragon Vein, which seemed to use some spots to dump its Low-quality energy, just like the sect used the incineration plateaus on the ground to get rid of their trash. That didn't matter at all to Karz since he had his own unique methods.

The horribly bad cultivation environment wasn't the only odd thing about the oversized courtyard. It was another oddity that raised a lot of brows in the sect, to the point Karz had earned his unflattering nickname.

Piles and piles of scraps filled almost every empty free spot of the courtyard, creating mounds reaching up to five meters tall. Karz looked around for a bit until he found the right spot. It was a three-meter-tall pile of alchemic dregs that had nearly turned to dry ash. He stowed away the completely drained materials before he released the pile he'd collected during the day.

After that, he walked to another pile of garbage and lay down on top of it with a contented smile. It was a scene just like this that had completely thrown his reputation into the gutter, but Karz didn't care. He was certain that even the Sect Master of the Blue Spring Sect would join him if he possessed the same ability.

Nothing happened for a few seconds, but soon he felt a hunger from the depths of his body. It grew and grew until it

couldn't be contained any longer. That feeling had to be satiated, and the universe gave its answer as thousands and thousands of celestial tendrils rose from the garbage piles.

Like moths to a flame, the tendrils wormed their way toward him. Most came from the recently added piles, while some were reluctantly forced out of the almost-decayed heaps that had been there for a few weeks. Some tendrils were even drawn out of the air, as Spiritual Energy freed itself from the earthly taint on its way to Karz.

His body was alight with force, the energy surging round and round between his meridians, leaving a little bit behind with every circuit. People thought he was just lazing about while lying in piles of garbage half the day, but he was actually cultivating at a speed that was probably unsurpassed in the sect.

He and Laondio agreed that the main issue stopping most people from progressing was resources. Truthfully, it wasn't just that. All methods of cultivation seemed to be filled with imperfections, where even the pills made by elders left over 70% of the energies of the Spiritual Herbs inside the discarded dregs.

Karz had no idea how to fix that issue, but his body had shown him the way to make use of that fact. He didn't know why, but he'd quickly realized others couldn't see this ability of his. All these beautiful tendrils that danced through the air were only visible to his gaze. A miracle just for him.

He looked at the sky as he silently cultivated with his homemade method. There were all kinds of worlds out there. Many far greater than the Hur'Vaz Empire the Blue Spring Sect was part of. Cultivators powerful beyond compare, beasts as large as whole planets, treasures with unimaginable power.

The world was truly limitless. Thankfully, Karz believed he was too.

GRAND ORIGINS

Zac awoke and was immediately beset by an intense hunger as he sat up with a grunt. He pushed down the sense of starvation as he looked around, and was relieved to see the situation wasn't too bad. He'd been completely consumed by his bloodline vision even after having his soul evolve. At least his surroundings were still somewhat intact.

Sometime during his breakthrough, the cave had been breached and flooded, but he continued to be protected from the currents outside. The cave itself had undergone a massive transformation, as all the flowers and materials they'd collected were gone, and the cave itself had grown to over five times in diameter.

It wasn't too bad. Zac suspected it was thanks to his somehow creating thousands of small vortices this time rather than one massive one directly behind him. He couldn't be sure, but Zac felt the difference was related to Karz's ability at the end. However, while Karz had become something like a magnet that extracted pure energy from all kinds of sources, his bloodline had proactively gone out on the hunt to swallow them into the Void.

It was the second time he'd been shown Karz and his unique abilities, and the visions filled him with mixed emotions. He already suspected it after the first vision, but now it almost felt certain. His mother's clan had somehow gotten their hands on the genes of the Limitless Emperor, and it was that supreme being's bloodline that coursed through his veins.

It was no wonder Leandra had said he carried the Original Sin. He initially thought it was because his birth had drawn the wrath of the Heavens, but that wasn't necessarily the case. What could be considered Original Sin, if not creating the System itself? Emperor Limitless had to be the biggest sinner in the history of the Multiverse in the eyes of the Technocrats.

Zac didn't know what to think about the situation. He wasn't even sure if he was an actual descendant or if Karz's bloodline had somehow been extracted and implanted into his body. Zac was pretty certain he wasn't a pure clone though, partly through clues left behind by Leandra, and partly by the fact he didn't look like Karz at all.

Karz was definitely human of Mediterranean descent somewhat, with black wavy hair and an olive complexion. His irises were golden, and his features were truthfully a lot better than Zac's.

The real situation was a bit unclear, but Zac had a decent guess what his mother's clan had been thinking. It wouldn't be too surprising if the Limitless Emperor had created some sort of unique access methods to the System, and Leandra might have planned on using his bloodline like some sort of back door.

Add Jeeves hidden by a perfected Duplicity Core, and they had all they needed to sneak the Dao of Technology into the System. Perhaps even take control of the whole thing. It was no wonder the System reacted so violently when he was discovered, if Zac's guesses were correct. Hopefully, he would be safe as long as his bloodline was corrupted, but it was something to keep in mind.

Perhaps he'd only invite punishment again if he uncorrupted the Void Emperor bloodline.

For now, he could only put the matter of his heritage and Emperor Limitless aside and focus on the gains. And just as he was about to open his Status Screen, he noticed something extremely odd. The amount of Twilight Energy he was assaulted by was extremely low. To the point his hidden nodes had no problem dealing with it.

That wouldn't have been surprising if the flowers were still there, but the flowers had been absorbed and the cave had been breached. He should be under a furious assault of Twilight Energy, but he was leisurely sitting in the submerged cave like nothing was wrong. He activated [**Piercing Gaze**], and even if its quality wasn't as good as [**Cosmic Gaze**], it exposed an extremely odd phenomenon.

The cave was absolutely drowned in Twilight Energy, but the situation was different within a sphere of two meters around his body. It was like he was enclosed in a small sanctuary, where the density was just a tenth of the energy outside. It wasn't like some void was swallowing the rest of the energy, but rather that it was somehow kept at bay.

Furthermore, he could actually sense a familiar and ancient aura radiating from his body, and Zac could somewhat guess what was going on. His eyes lit up, and he opened his Status Screen to confirm his suspicions.

Name: Zachary Atwood

Level: 114

Class: [E-Epic] Edge of Arcadia

Race: [D] Human – Void Emperor (Corrupted)

Alignment: [Earth] Port Atwood – Planetary Lord

Titles: [...] Sovereign-Select, Frontrunner, Apex Progenitor, Pathstrider, Runebinder

Limited Titles: Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star – 14th, Weight of Sin, Equanimity, Heart of Fire, Big Axe Gladiator

Dao: Fragment of the Axe – Peak, Fragment of the Coffin – Peak, Fragment of the Bodhi – Peak

Core: [E] Duplicity

Strength: 7,825 [Increase: 105%. Efficiency: 238%]

Dexterity: 3,502 [Increase: 75%. Efficiency: 187%]

Endurance: 6,823 [Increase: 96%. Efficiency: 238%]

Vitality: 5,790 [Increase: 84%. Efficiency: 238%]

Intelligence: 1,447 [Increase: 69%. Efficiency: 187%]

Wisdom: 2,862 [Increase: 76%. Efficiency: 187%]

Luck: 455 [Increase: 91%. Efficiency: 197%]

Free Points: 0

Nexus Coins: [D] 938,715

His attributes hadn't changed since the last time he checked, and neither had he gained a title for evolving his bloodline. He'd heard from Catheya there was a title for awakening your bloodline while in F-grade, with a greater version available if you awakened it before even starting cultivating. Unfortunately, it looked like simply catching up wasn't enough to get the title while in E-grade.

Still, Zac hadn't expected one, and was far more interested in his Bloodline Screen.

Bloodline: [E – Corrupted] Void Emperor

Talent: Force of the Void – 32%, Void Zone

Bloodline Nodes: [E]Void Heart, [E] Spiritual Void, [E] Purity of the Void

Zac looked at the result with satisfaction. He was already 99% certain after the vision, but he really managed to evolve his bloodline to E-grade in one go. For now, he wouldn't need to worry about it for a long while, since gaining a D-grade bloodline generally wasn't possible before actually getting there in your cultivation.

Of course, he would still have to nurture his hidden nodes to set the foundation that would allow him to upgrade them after becoming a Hegemon.

The most obvious change was the addition of a second bloodline talent, **[Void Zone]**. It sounded like a domain ability, and he figured it was this ability that kept the Twilight Energy at bay. It was just like with his first bloodline talent. Simply on by default until he managed to form a connection.

Zac turned his attention inward, trying to glean whether anything else had changed. At first, everything looked the same, until he came to his pathways, which had widened a bit. Not only that, he could feel his cells were larger even if they were the same size. Though that made no sense.

It was almost like they were forming small spatial arrays. For what purpose, Zac didn't know. He sensed his energy reserves, and they didn't seem any larger now compared to before. What was the point of millions of small hidden pockets inside his body if they didn't do anything?

Zac couldn't think of anything in the vision that resembled what he was looking at, and he could only put the matter aside. He figured it shouldn't be something bad, and the truth would sooner or later show itself. Instead, he tried to figure out exactly how his new bloodline talent worked.

There was no drain at all on his Cosmic Energy. Judging by the aura, the talent ran on the Void Energy provided by **[Force of the Void]**. He thought back to the vision of Karz, and it almost felt like the System or his mother had a sense of humor. In the first vision, Karz showed the ability to endlessly gain affinities through absorption, while he was perpetually stuck with no affinities.

Then Karz gained the ability to freely absorb energy that even more powerful cultivators had no way of extracting, but Zac got the ability to keep energy at bay?

The ability was definitely useful in his current predicament, but its long-term usefulness wasn't quite as clear. However, Zac had high hopes for it to double as both a defensive mechanism and a suppression. For example, the Twilight Energy could essentially be considered poison, but he was able to keep it away from him.

Would he be able to do the same if a cultivator drowned the area in a poison mist, keeping himself protected? Would he be able to do it even if it was something more corporeal, like a blade created with Cosmic Energy? Would it be barred from getting close to him, like an ultimate zone of nullification?

There were other unclear things, and he curiously took out a Middle-grade Nexus Crystal and crushed it. A puff of energy spread out in his new domain, but disappeared after a few seconds. Furthermore, the amount of Twilight Energy that managed to pass through the Void increased by a small amount when the **[Void Zone]** was tainted by Cosmic Energy.

He took out a Supreme Nexus Crystal and did the same thing. The result was similar, but the effect was more pronounced. It looked like there was a limit to how much energy the **[Void Zone]** could push away or banish, or whatever it was doing. Still, it would be a great tool to add to his repertoire, and it was an ability that was essentially a cheat in this place.

With this, he became infallible in the Twilight Ocean.

He wanted to experiment some more, but he first needed to get the ability under control before he ran out of Void Energy. Over three years had passed since he'd last done this, but he still hadn't found the slightest clue of any better cultivation method than **[Bloodline Resonance]**. Hopefully, it would work this time around as well.

Zac took out the manual to refresh his memory before he started to create a resonance with his second talent. The ripples in his body grew more and more intense over the next hour, and even his improved constitution was reaching its limits from the endless collisions ravaging his body.

Finally, he felt another connection form, this time to the second bloodline talent. He breathed out in relief before eating a healing pill. The damage wasn't too bad, and he started to play around with the talent after resting for just five minutes.

He turned it on and off, and Zac looked on with interest as the Twilight Energy surged and was pushed back over and over again. It almost looked like waves crashing against the rocks on the shore, though the scene calmed after he stopped messing around. There was something he wanted to test, and he swapped over to his Draugr form.

The powerful domain was completely unaffected by the change, keeping the Twilight Energy at bay as he was filled

with Miasma. He scanned his undead constitution for any changes, and just like his human body, the only change was the odd enlarging of his cells. Using **[Void Zone]** worked the same way, allowing him to move on to his next experiment.

Zac tried to activate **[Profane Exponents]**, but frowned when he felt resistance. It looked like even his own body was under the effect of the weird field he emitted, prohibiting him from doing anything. Zac changed his tactic and tried to activate the skill outside the zone, but the sensation of great resistance was the same.

The suppression wasn't absolute though, and as he pushed even harder, the skeletons appeared behind him, though they looked a bit bleak. A barrier that took its sweet time appeared, and it was significantly weakened. Zac dispelled the three pygmies, and they returned just a few seconds later, this time full of power as they radiated that ancient aura of his hidden energy reserve.

Zac's heart started to beat faster as he understood the implications. What if he was in a melee, and his new domain swallowed both him and his enemy? A seasoned veteran would immediately force the skill to activate, but he would be a bit slowed down and restrained. Meanwhile, Zac could actually speed up his skill summon, increasing the gulf even further.

Just how powerful was this ability?

This was a true domain, far surpassing those he used to create a restrictive hellscape inside the cage of **[Profane Seal]**. The only problem was that its radius was too low for it to have much practical effect, since most fights ended without Zac getting within such close proximity of his enemies. However, the skill had just been awakened. Just like how the storage of **[Force of the Void]** grew, so should the radius of **[Void Zone]**.

He could imagine the scene in the future. Him locking down kilometers of space in every direction as he unleashed instantaneously conjured skills on his helpless enemies. These two abilities together created an almost unbeatable

combination. Of course, this restriction would probably be a lot weaker against higher-leveled enemies, which was a shame, since those were the only real enemies of his.

At least it should help him stay alive when swept into a conflict like the one in the Technocrat research base.

He remembered how he'd almost gotten himself killed by the errant energies when the Great Redeemer and the Collector clashed. If he had this bloodline talent back then, the wounds he accumulated would probably not have been so bad. He might even have been able to stay conscious for the impartment of **[Purity of the Void]**.

He kept trying out various things over the next thirty minutes to find any weaknesses of the ability. But it really looked like it was pretty well-rounded.

The biggest difference was whether the energy entering the domain was "owned" or not. If it was ownerless energy like the ambient Twilight Energy, the effect was extremely pronounced. However, even talismans maintained around half of their efficiency when he launched them at himself with the help of his chains.

Skills were even less restrained, and his Spirit Tools weren't affected at all from entering or exiting the sphere. In other words, it was a pure energy barrier, with no real effect on physical objects. There was some more experimentation to be done, but he was starting to feel a drain on his body. He was fast running out of Void Energy.

The weird organ appeared in his lap, a stonelike clump over a meter across. Though it contained powerful energies, Zac sighed when he sensed he was unable to extract it at all while **[Void Zone]** was active. He was forced to deactivate the protection, and a surge of Twilight Energy came crashing in on him.

It only lasted for a few seconds before he cracked a Supreme Miasma Crystal as he took out his Soul Strengthening Array. The environment had been ruined after activating his bloodline, and he wasn't planning on staying

here any longer. He would just rest up and figure out his next step while completing a full cycle with the array.

Remembering how his bloodline had gobbled up innumerable valuable flowers made him remember the Void gates that spread all across the mountain range. Was it possible he'd gained contribution points from awakening his bloodline like this?

[Arcaz Black – Contribution: 1,244,719 Rank: 1. Value: 150,000 (Bounty)]

Zac blankly looked at the ladder for a full minute, completely forgetting to activate the Soul Strengthening Array. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. He'd shot up to the first position in one go, overtaking even that crazy vampire with two hundred thousand contribution points to spare. Whatever he'd consumed during his bloodline awakening had been worth as much as twenty mothertrees.

He was elated at the opportunity to snag a top-tier Limited Title, but the bounty on his head was a stark reminder of the danger his position represented. Everyone would be gunning for him. Especially Uona and that Havarok princeling. Even more troubling, the System definitely wouldn't let him rest easy with his current rank.

No one had felt the sweet sorrow of the System's attention as frequently as he had during the early phase of the integration. The more outstanding you were, the more challenges the System would throw your way. Zac sincerely doubted the System would let him sit down at the bottom of the chasm and cultivate in peace after having taken the first position on the ladder.

A loud crash startled him awake, and Zac cursed himself for his nigh-prophetic misgivings. A second crash followed, and it contained such force, Zac felt like he'd been physically punched in his chest even though the source came from outside.

Zac started to get a sinking feeling as he remembered the broken peak he'd climbed the other day, and grimaced when an enraged roar ripped through the water with such force, the

whole mountain shook. A tremendous aura spread through the area, exhibiting an anger so palpable that the water almost boiled.

Zac couldn't see the originator of the furious bellow, but he didn't need to. The gargantuan snake had returned, and it was pissed off.

KING OF THE MOUNTAIN

Various incipient plans for the near future were thrown out the window as the whole mountain shook under the weight of the Beast King's wrath. There was no way Zac could stay here and work on his cultivation. Even if not discovered, he wasn't certain the mountain would survive the rampage of the enormous snake much longer.

Zac retrieved his chains and made a final cursory scan of the area before he started to move. As expected, everything of value had already been absorbed through his bloodline evolution, not even leaving husks behind. He figured it wasn't a complete loss though. All those treasures had to contribute to something when they were swallowed by the Void, even if he wasn't exactly sure what that was just yet.

Another roar made the water churn even within the mountain, and Zac searched for a way out. He doubted he gave off any aura from the treasures that disappeared. But he also doubted an enraged Beast King, perhaps even Beast Emperor, would care too much about such minor details. It would simply attack anything that was suspect.

As for fighting the snake, there was simply no way.

The immensity of the beast was beyond what he could handle, no matter if you talked level or physical size. His stockpiled energy from the Remnants was mostly used up after fighting Uona, but even if it wasn't, so what? A full-powered Annihilation Sphere wouldn't be enough to breach the gargantuan scales the snake was covered in.

An Origin Mark might create some sort of tumorlike growth, but there was no way one mark was enough to take out something that size. Escape was the only option, preferably all the way to the potential wall he'd gleaned in the distance. He would have to pray his newfound ability would be enough to take him across the vast chasm without getting ripped to shreds.

First things first. He needed to get away from the central mountain since it was just a matter of time before the snake made its way here. After all, Zac had a strong suspicion it was no longer hidden like before now that he'd absorbed all those odd flowers. The snake would definitely be investigating.

The cave he'd been teleported into before had been sealed off from the outside, but his evolution had caused a crack and let the water inside, providing Zac with a convenient route out. It wasn't a proper pathway, and Zac had no choice but to activate [**Abyssal Phase**] when the crack turned much too thin to traverse.

Zac appeared at the surface of the peak, and he reverted into his tangible form as he restrained his aura as much as he could. His body was already starting to fill up with Twilight Energy after having used his intangible form, and he was forced to reactivate his bloodline talent.

The storm of Twilight Energy that burrowed into his body was instantly rebuffed, giving him a reprieve from the onslaught. Zac sighed as he carefully peered out of the mouth of the crack, and was thankfully met only with raging currents and distant peaks. No Midgard snake was slithering about outside, though the palpable air of bloodlust suffused the whole area.

Another roar echoed, and Zac guessed the snake was still laying waste to the outer sector of the cluster of peaks. He was about to set out, but his danger sense woke up and he immediately shrank back into the crevasse with wide eyes. It wasn't the snake that appeared. He instead felt a powerful sense spread across the whole area before continuing toward the other peaks.

The snake was on the hunt for real.

It felt like his heart threatened to jump out of his mouth, but he almost cried in relief when he felt another crash reverberate through the area. The snake had attacked another peak rather than coming for him. It looked like his Void Zone managed to obfuscate his presence to at least avoid a cursory scan.

This was his chance, and he gritted his teeth as he pushed out of the mountain. Void Zone helped with the Twilight Energy, but it didn't really affect the currents, just like Zac feared. They started dragging him farther into the depths while he traversed the chasm between the peaks, and shallow gashes appeared one after another on his body because of the water.

But it was far preferable to becoming snake food.

Zac hadn't had time to completely restore his reserves of Void Energy after his experiments, but sensed it would be enough to keep his new talent active for half an hour. He needed to use that time to the fullest to get away from this place while the snake was occupied.

He couldn't follow his old regimen of climbing for a few minutes before resting for an hour. The whole mountain range would be leveled before he got out of harm's way.

Soon enough, Zac crossed the chasm to the next mountain, using as little energy as he possibly could. Part of him believed the immense density of Twilight Energy should be enough to obscure a small burst of energy coming from his skills. He wouldn't take any chances with that monstrosity lurking somewhere close by.

Zac didn't stop and rest like he usually would, and instead popped a healing pill as he started to climb around the peak so he could swim toward the next one. He was pretty familiar with the area after having looked for treasure for a few weeks, and he knew there were five mountains he would have to cross before reaching the peak closest to the distant mountain.

A roar echoed again, and Zac was dismayed at how much closer it was. Being subjected to the cry at closer proximity

was like getting hit by a sledgehammer. Zac could only look on as the water became tainted with ichor squeezed out of his wounds. Still, he didn't so much as grunt or let his aura fluctuate for fear that he would be discovered.

Out of nowhere, a gargantuan shape flashed by, its speed practically impossible considering its size. It was like Zac's whole vision had been replaced by impossibly large scales. Zac said a silent prayer as he prepared for the worst, only to be relieved to see the beast ramming straight into a neighboring mountain, causing cracks thousands of meters long to spread across its slopes.

The Twilight Ocean practically buckled from the impact before it rushed out in every direction with terrifying force. Zac didn't even have a chance to erect any defenses before the wave crashed into him, almost knocking him clean out then and there. His chains thankfully managed to keep him fastened to the mountain wall, and he grabbed on with desperation as huge chunks of rock were ripped away around him.

A weaker screech echoed out as a hundred-meter-long fish with long trailing fins shot out of one of the cracks in the neighboring mountain, its aura far eclipsing the Beast King Zac had killed in the Greengrove Archipelago. From the looks of it, the fish had been in secluded cultivation deep inside the mountain, enjoying the dense Twilight Energy in the area until the snake came knocking.

However, it clearly wasn't preparing to fight the intruder over having its territory encroached. It pierced the torrential currents as it expended every effort to escape. The far larger beast wouldn't let up though, and its head snaked around with impossible speed, snatching the fish up in a ruthless bite.

There was no fight and no struggle. Just a much larger predator gobbling up its helpless prey, which only reinforced Zac's decision not to fight that thing. Killing the Beast King did nothing to alleviate the snake's anger, and it released another earth-shattering roar after having swallowed the much smaller fish.

Zac was starting to accumulate wounds upon wounds even with Void Zone active, and he wasn't sure how much longer he could take even indirect damage from this beast. He felt incredibly small and helpless, just like when he'd witnessed the clash between the Hegemons inside the Mystic Realm. Black ichor freely leaked from his nose and ears as the large cracks all over the mountain worsened.

The ocean itself became muddied for a few seconds as innumerable shards of rock fell off the mountains and joined the currents. The debris was quickly cleared thanks to the unearthly speed of the water, and the monstrous beast was once more exposed.

The snake released another snort before it started to slither away, completely crushing the currents that slammed against its scales with enough force to kill a normal Peak E-grade warrior. Zac's whole body shook from a mix of primal fear and adrenaline overload. He staunchly held on as he kept utilizing his new bloodline talent to be able to withstand the Twilight Energy.

The ability really did help a bit against discovery. Of course, it was also possible he was simply so small and insignificant that the snake didn't care about him, though he wouldn't rely on such a flaky theory to survive. He stayed completely still against the mountain wall as he watched the snake move farther and farther away, until it was impossible to discern its head even with [**Cosmic Gaze**].

It was the first time Zac managed to spot the true appearance of the impossibly large creature. It had a long snout like an alligator rather than a traditional snake, complete with the teeth to match. Hundreds and hundreds of jagged fangs filled its enormous maw, each one large enough to be considered a mountain on its own. Eight pitch-black pairs of lifeless orbs sat on the two sides of its head, the smallest pair of eyes as large as barn doors.

Its appearance was terrifying enough, but Zac's thoughts were more focused on something curious. There was actually a large rune on the beast's forehead. It wasn't something that

had naturally formed on the beast's scale, but rather something inscribed. More importantly, it was a rune Zac recognized.

The insignia of the Twilight Lord.

He had a few theories about how something like that was possible, but now wasn't the time to worry about the details. Zac didn't dare wait too long, and swam right under the snake's tail after shoving a stack of talismans into a crack in the rocks behind him. He took advantage of the cover against the currents that the enormous animal provided, and reached the next mountain before the Beast King completely left the area.

It became clear what the snake was doing as Zac moved away from the heart of the mountain range. Every so often, another of the immense pulses spread out and covered the whole area, and a tremendous shockwave erupted within a minute. Zac estimated it had exposed and disposed of over twenty Beast Kings over the last hour, one more powerful than the next.

A sense of dread fell upon him. The area was nowhere near as desolate as he'd initially thought while traveling back and forth in search of treasures. It was just that these beasts all hid within the depths of the mountains. Perhaps in fear of the big guy now hunting them one by one.

Another pulse rippled through the water, the force of the ability powerful enough to divert the currents themselves. Zac froze as he staunchly endured the feeling of his insides getting shifted by the energy wave. After it passed, Zac hurriedly squeezed into a nearby crevasse and cracked two Supreme Miasma Crystals as he took out the void beast organ.

Five minutes passed, at which point Zac stopped and activated Void Zone. It was just in time, as the gargantuan snake passed by just two mountains away in search of its next victim.

It took over two hours, and he'd been forced to make four stops, but he finally reached his destination: the very edge of the mountain range. Less than half of the mountains in the area

remained unscathed by this point, and Zac could only attribute the fact he was still alive to dumb luck.

The snake hadn't attacked anything closer than that fish he'd seen killed earlier, which was the only reason he hadn't been turned to mush. Of course, if it came to that, he could always jump into a current toward the depths of the Twilight Chasm, but that would only be replacing one certain death with another.

There were limits to everything, even his cheat-like methods. Zac held no delusions that he'd be able to freely travel as far down the chasm as he wished without any ramifications. For now, the plan was still on, and Zac eyed his target far in the distance. There was just the issue of the vast gulf of frantic currents in the way.

It would be perilous to cross this distance even with Void Zone, but there wasn't much he could do about it. The snake was growing more irate by the minute, no doubt because it failed to recover a single one of the missing treasures. Zac wasn't some expert in hiding his presence, and he'd be discovered by one of the scans sooner or later as the beast tightened its net. After all, he was occasionally forced to turn off his talent to restore his reserves of Void Energy.

Time was of the essence.

Zac didn't immediately set out. When the scanning pulse came, Zac waited with bated breath until he heard the distant explosion accompanied by a whimpering cry of some unknown Beast King. This was it. He wouldn't get a better opportunity.

Zac shot out, taking a leap of faith into the unknown, his senses strained to the maximum to avoid the currents too powerful for him to deal with. It felt like he was in the middle of a hurricane, surrounded by rampaging gales. However, something changed behind him, prompting him to get viciously swiped by a large rock being dragged down toward the depths.

An outcropping on the neighboring mountain transformed into a humongous octopus that sped off, cutting through the

water in the same direction as Zac. Each one of its eight-hundred-meter-long tentacles frantically pushed the beast forward, creating a full-fledged storm in its attempt to escape.

Zac swore from the surprise. The Beast King had been planning the exact same thing as he, both of them speeding away from the area the moment the Beast King was occupied on the other side of the mountain range. The octopus had no doubt spotted Zac considering their close proximity, but both minded their own business in their desperation to escape. Zac considered turning back, but he was already some ways into the water. He had to keep going.

Things were going even better compared to when he used his Cosmic Vessels, and Zac saw a glimpse of hope that his plan would actually work. Void Zone dealt with most of the Twilight Energy, and he used **[Love's Bond]** in its shield form like a turtle shell to protect most of his body as he pushed himself forward with the help of his legs.

However, an infuriated roar and a sense of overwhelming doom dashed those hopes. He couldn't see it, but he felt how a towering killing intent had locked onto the area, which meant it was only a matter of time before that terrifying maw caught up. Zac swore as his abyssal eyes turned toward the Beast King swimming next to him, a flame of fear and fury burning in his chest.

This goddamn octopus had blown his cover.

RECIPROCITY

Clearly, Zac wasn't the only one who held animosity toward the other escapee. The octopus screeched with a mix of fury and fear, making its move before Zac had time to figure out a way to deal with the crisis. It was like space twisted as a tentacle shot toward him, extending far beyond what should be possible. Just a blink of an eye, and the attack was upon him.

Zac only had time to readjust his shield and empower it with the Fragment of the Coffin before the vicious swipe slammed into him, throwing him back against the mountain range. Simultaneously, a vast haze of black sludge covered the water, and it was somehow resistant to the incessant pull of the currents, hovering in the area like a thick haze.

The fury in Zac's heart turned into a raging conflagration as he glared in the direction of the Beast King. There was no doubt about it. The octopus wanted to use him as a scapegoat. How could Zac give up without a fight? He activated all the talismans he had left in various spots in the mountain range, hoping a series of explosions would divert the snake's attention.

Meanwhile, a gray pill flew into Zac's mouth as he set off after the tentacled beast, the effect immediate. His muscles swelled, and torrential amounts of Miasma coursed through his body. Just like with all berserking pills he'd eaten before, this one came with a surging momentum and battle lust, though not to the point of full-on-lunacy like the Rageroot Oak seeds.

The goal of escape blurred as Zac's abyssal eyes scanned the area in search of the octopus, and [**Love's Bond**] changed

to its offensive form as he forced himself through the obstacle it left behind. However, the Beast King was in its natural habitat, whereas Zac was not. Even a top-quality berserking pill wasn't enough to allow him to catch up to the frantic escape of the octopus, especially considering how the weird cloud of ink was a sticky goo that impeded his progress.

Even worse, the enormous snake was completely uninterested in investigating the cascading series of eruptions from the talismans, and was fast catching up. Zac couldn't be certain, but judging by how rapidly the towering aura in the distance grew more and more distinct, he had less than half a minute before the beast closed in. The snake should have been on the other side of the mountain range, but the speed the snake exhibited was far exceeding anything that should appear in this trial.

The situation wasn't looking good, and desperate times called for desperate measures.

A black spike appeared in Zac's hand, and a surge of cursed power coursed through his body as the berserking compound he'd looted from Faceless #9 activated. His body threatened to explode as the two berserking treasures raged havoc, and his body disappeared in a puff.

Of course, it wasn't Zac actually exploding, but rather him activating [**Abyssal Phase**]. His mind screamed for speed as he cut through the churning water, and the additional energy and the battle madness from the berserking pills allowed him to withstand the currents far longer than he normally would.

He didn't care about the damage being wrought upon his intangible form. His mind was fast becoming consumed by the hunt, of going ever faster. Suddenly, it was like the already turbid surroundings became even more leaden, almost to the point that time seemed to have stopped altogether. It became easier to navigate around the worst of the currents, and Zac pushed through the restrictive ink and caught up to the fleeing octopus in no time.

Reality quickly caught up when Zac appeared right on top of the octopus' mantle, his eyes burning with madness as

[Verun's Bite] ripped through the water. A massive jagged edge appeared in front of the axe as two streams of mental energy empowered by Dao and madness burrowed into the skill fractal of **[Gorehew]**.

The octopus tried to use a tentacle to swipe Zac off, but two chains dug into flesh as the other two moved to intercept. The jagged edge of Zac's offensive skill slammed into the bulbous mantle, and the defensive measures of the octopus proved utterly incapable of forming any significant defense. A water barrier was ripped apart, and the thick sinewy flesh was cut right through by the skill empowered by two Peak Dao Fragments.

Eight tentacles spasmodically flailed about as Zac's axe dug into the innards of the beast, but he still didn't get any surge of energy even after swinging his weapon three times in rapid succession. Zac growled in frustration as he saw flesh rapidly regenerate, the Beast King showing its resilient life force. This wasn't the time for a protracted battle, and two new streams of mental energy entered his shoulder.

A small sphere appeared between his hands, and Zac pushed it into the bleeding wounds before he activated **[Abyssal Phase]** with the help of **[Force of the Void]** once more. He'd almost run out of energy after restoring his arm and leg a few weeks back, but he'd recovered just enough to barely form an extremely weak Origin Mark.

Zac didn't expect the small outburst of pure Creation to actually kill the enormous beast, especially seeing how durable it was. But his eyes lit up when he saw how a series of weird transformations took place inside the mantle. The Beast King's thoughts were no doubt in turmoil with the snake bearing down on them, and wild imagination was like fertilizer for the Origin Mark.

Between the grievous wounds and the Origin Mark creating havoc, the octopus was dead in the water, allowing Zac to activate his movement skill to create a commanding lead. However, the energy-dense water was soon too much for Zac, even when filled with energy from the berserking treasures, and he was forced to revert to his normal form.

Thankfully, he managed to create a distance of over two thousand meters by that point, but every hair on his head stood on end as he sensed an extremely powerful consciousness lock onto him.

The thick ink left by the octopus shuddered and dissipated as half the horizon was replaced by a maw the size of a mountain. Zac peered into its depths, feeling just as weak as when he'd gazed upon the true form of the Collector. He only had to gaze at that terrifying scene for an instant before the maw closed around the octopus, turning it into yet another appetizer.

Zac was in no mood to stick around, but his horror only mounted when he was utterly unable to do so. The whole Twilight Chasm had practically frozen solid. The furious currents were gone, no longer leaving lacerations across his body. It would normally have been a relief, but the terror in Zac's heart only mounted upon finding himself unable to move. His arms were flailing, and he was expelling huge amounts of Miasma to create momentum, but he didn't move an inch from the terrifying head that grew ever closer.

It didn't look like it was intent on ruthlessly gobbling him up like it did the octopus, as the snake stopped a few hundred meters away from Zac. His whole vision was blocked out by the huge snout of the beast, and his heart tightened as sixteen eyes focused on him.

'*DRAUGR,*' a booming voice echoed in Zac's mind with enough power to make him puke out a mouthful of ichor. '*WHERE ARE THE FORMATION FLAGS? RETURN THEM, AND YOU CAN LIVE.*'

If being stared down by a primordial creature wasn't clue enough, Zac knew he was in deep shit the moment he heard it wanted its items back. Most likely, the array flags had been swallowed by the Void with the rest of the treasures of the mountain range. His thoughts whirred, and he tried to see if he could lie his way out of this one. It hadn't worked so far, but he didn't have a lot of options.

“I am Arcaz Black from the Abyssal Shores. I don’t know what you’re speaking of. I was dragged down here just minutes ago because of some sort of earthquake. Help me reach the surface, and the empire will reward you. You are connected to the Twilight Lord. I’m sure he would appreciate gaining another friend among the Draugr,” Zac said with a bow, trying to mask his fear.

‘IF YOU DO NOT HAVE THEM, THEN YOU CAN JUST DIE,’ the earth-shattering voice echoed in his mind as the beast spat out a wave of destruction that rippled toward him.

“THIS IS BREAKING THE RULES OF THE TRIAL!” Zac roared at the top of his lungs, seeing no option but to turn to the only one who could save him. For good measure, he added a prize to make his complaint be taken seriously. “SAVE ME, AND I’LL PROVIDE ANOTHER PIECE OF THE PATTERN!”

The Beast King snorted, then froze as the whole chasm rumbled.

The world of darkness became illuminated by a golden hue as the sea turned into one of lightning. An aura of vast power, far eclipsing that of the snake, descended. Zac’s gambit had succeeded. He wasn’t trying to elicit help from the Twilight Lord. He was looking for someone more reliable.

The System itself.

‘IMPOSSIBLE!’ the snake screeched, voice filled with shock and dread.

There was no response to the snake’s cry. A bolt of lightning entered the wave of destruction rippling toward Zac, causing it to unravel halfway between himself and the Beast King.

Zac had practically been slapped by an angry god from the impact, and cracking sounds echoed through his body as dozens of bones shattered in an instant. The force launched him like a rocket through the water, completely ignoring the snake’s restrictions. It was almost like he teleported as he slammed into the mountain wall tens of kilometers away,

causing massive fissures to spread out like a spiderweb for hundreds of meters in each direction.

The world blurred as Zac felt yet another set of bones shatter from the collision, but the berserking pills stopped him from losing consciousness. He quickly used two of his Healing Brands, which at least allowed him to somewhat stabilize his body's gruesome state. The area was still drenched in lightning, and having been thrown away to a greater distance gave Zac a proper vantage of what was going on.

Thousands of golden lightning bolts rained down on the snake, its gargantuan scales splintering one after another from the impact. The area around the oversized beast had turned into a zone of death, and lower Beast Kings would probably have been turned to ash if they entered. However, Zac worried when he saw that the snake didn't actually get ripped apart from the heavenly punishment.

It fought tooth and nail, and a whirlpool consisting of terrifyingly condensed Twilight Energy sprung up around it, protecting its body as it tried to endure the tribulation. Not only that, Zac saw how nine white peaks rose from the depths, each of them covered in intricate patterns. Together, they cut through the water like it was nothing, forming an immense formation that released waves and waves of power that surrounded the snake in yet another layer of protection.

The thunderstorm raged with greater and greater intensity, but Zac sensed the amount of tribulation lightning the System had conjured was limited, prompting him to swear in exasperation. How could the endlessly powerful overlord of the Multiverse lose against an oversized snake? A familiar voice rang in his head, and thankfully not the painfully loud roar of the beast.

**[Special Scenario reciprocity has been acknowledged,
balance is maintained.]**

“How is almost killing me and not even dealing with the beast achieving balance?” Zac spat with incredulity. There was no response. The System's presence was already gone, leaving behind a single prompt.

Reciprocity (Unique, Limited): Surrender a Glimpse of Chaos. Reward: – (0/1) [598d]

[NOTE: Failure to comply will result in loss of 10 levels and one random Dao.]

Zac's eyes grew wider and wider as he read the prompt, almost to the point he forgot the predicament he was in. Losing ten levels wasn't too bad, but the System was actually threatening his Daos, the very core of his path? That was even worse than when it threatened his skills back in the Mystic Realm, and there was clearly no room for negotiation.

The System really wasn't holding anything back when it paid up front. And its payment was just fixing an oversight of its own. Zac suspected the snake's presence in the E-grade trial was just like when he met Greatest. The powerful pugilist had bent the rules of Zac's quest for a moment, allowing them to talk before he was teleported back to Earth. Similarly, the Twilight Lord had bent the System's rules to sneak a powerful subject into the trial, and it had almost gotten Zac killed.

Unfair as it might be, there was no use in railing against the Heavens. He could only suck it up and be happy he got to live another day. It was just like how Catheya described it. He was bound to be a chess piece until he gained the power to control the board himself.

A tremendous clap of thunder refocused Zac's attention. The sea of lightning was condensing, gathering for one final strike. Meanwhile, the snake's aura was reaching unprecedented heights as the white mountain peaks below it cracked. The peaks crumbled, and as they fell apart, the shards of milky stones formed a tremendously large rune spanning over ten kilometers.

Looking at the sigil was like looking at the truth of the ocean itself, and it seemed able to even borrow the unending force of the Twilight Ocean as the water started to churn. The terrifying Beast King was clearly going all out in an effort to withstand the lightning punishment. Win or lose, Zac couldn't stay for the result. His body was already teetering on the brink

of collapse, and he wasn't actually that far from the battleground.

Zac looked back and forth in search of a solution, and saw his chance when he spotted a piece of moss deep within the crack in the mountain wall. The crack had been caused by him slamming into it, but for there to be moss, there had to be a tunnel system farther inside.

No matter if he climbed up or down the mountain wall, he'd be exposed to the snake. But if he managed to head deep enough into the wall of the Twilight Chasm, he might be safe.

He took a steadying breath and activated [**Abyssal Phase**], and was immediately beset by the terrifying energies that suffused the area. It wasn't just the Twilight Energy any longer, but also the lightning of the Heavens themselves that infiltrated the water, along with the extremely powerful energy Zac suspected was part of the snake's Dao.

There was no time to lose, so Zac shot into the crack, digging deeper and deeper in a frantic effort to put as much solid rock between himself and the cataclysmic clash outside. The seemingly frozen world of [**Abyssal Phase**] shattered as an apocalyptic explosion erupted far in the distance.

Zac was immediately forced out of his intangible form. He was ready, and dozens of defensive talismans activated while the pygmy skeleton appeared, covering him in barriers while a black haze ensconced him to divert falling rocks. The shockwave ripped through the area, throwing Zac into a wall, his defenses barely able to do anything to lessen the impact.

The world turned dim.

A pained wail pierced through the mountain and woke him up. Zac hoped it would be a final roar of defiance before inevitable death, but there was an unmistakable tone of elation hidden within the pained howl. The snake survived, though it most likely was a Pyrrhic victory.

Zac's whole body screamed in protest, but he forcibly activated his movement skill once more, squeezing even farther into the tunnel system at the edge of the Twilight

Chasm. Deeper and deeper he went until he could go no farther. He reverted into his physical form and activated his last healing brand before swapping over to his human form. He was running dangerously low on Miasma, and he would rather transform himself than suddenly just fall over.

The transformation took just a few seconds, but Zac felt himself on the precipice of passing out three times over. He soon gained his human form, and he arduously set off, using **[Earthstrider]** to make his way through the sprawling tunnel system. Using the skill the normal way while having **[Void Zone]** active was impossible, so he could only tap into his rapidly dwindling stores of Void Energy to make do.

He felt a few more shockwaves coming from the direction of the snake as he fled for his life. They grew more and more indistinct until they couldn't be heard at all. Zac no longer had any idea just how far into the bedrock of the chasm he'd gone, but knew he couldn't go much farther. His vision was already closing in on him. He looked back and forth until he found a secluded spot.

Zac hadn't seen any creatures making these tunnels their home just yet, but there should be some considering the walls were covered in valuable herbs and the atmosphere was full of energy. His hands shook, but he managed to place a set of isolation and obfuscation arrays before he collapsed, cradling the void beast organ.

His mind was slipping, but he needed to keep the **[Void Zone]** active to not get killed by the ambient energy. The talent had been activated while he was unconscious the last time, and he prayed it would work out this way. He no longer had any choice but let the darkness consume him and fell into a deep and dreamless slumber.

It might have been a few minutes or it might have been a few days, but Zac was suddenly startled awake as a prompt appeared in front of his face. He looked at it with bleary eyes, and a wry smile spread across his face as his mind drifted back to sleep, briefly wondering what kind of reaction people would have upon seeing his name on the top of the ladder.

DARK HORSE

“What the hell!” Qirai screamed, her eyes almost bulging out of her head. “Am I seeing things! Has this cursed ocean finally driven me insane?”

“If it did, then it dragged us all down,” Catheya sighed as she looked at the screen in front of her.

[Monthly Contribution Ladder]

1,401,322 Arcaz Black

1,108,458 Uona Noz’Valadir

1,021,453 Ykrodas Havarok

782,248 Kataron Rissit

776,338 Haldur

703,654 Aia Ouro

694,332 Dravzur Kuldass

634,678 Drogrid Rotheart

598,234 Alduz Venarun

578,122 Adrokles

...

100. 378,346 Iana

Her face was calm, but a storm raged in her heart. Just what had that lunatic done this time? Was it too much to ask for him to stay out of the limelight? No, he had to throw a wrench in the whole trial, getting his name known far and

wide. She thought he'd learned his lesson after causing all that havoc back in Hollowtongue Mountain after they parted, considering he'd been quiet for some time.

Turns out he was just amassing momentum for whatever madness he accomplished. Catheya felt a headache coming on as she tried to figure out what to do from here on out. She might have been able to hide Zac Piker's identity before, as no one of importance would care for a random trial-taker, but how could she possibly do that now?

Forget her master. Even the officials of the empire might start asking questions about him, especially when this trial was so out of the norm.

It was almost mindboggling the kind of shockwaves Zac Piker managed to create with his limited power. He'd plunged the whole Zecia Sector into chaos while still in the F-grade, and her master had actually estimated he was somehow related to the odd spatial ripples that had been the hot gossip back before they left. He didn't have any proof, but the timing was too coincidental with the appearance of the Stele of Conflict.

Now he'd appeared here, and the trial that had been held for tens of millions of years without much issue had somehow become the preamble of a cataclysmic struggle between three empires. And once more, he'd become the eye of the storm of fate, and Catheya had a creeping suspicion he wasn't done causing trouble.

After all, there was definitely something odd about the location she found for him. She hadn't managed to get past the restrictions to enter the heart of the volcano, but her nose told her all she needed to know. That place was cursed. Yet that man wanted to go there, proving he was up to no good. The question was what she should do.

Stay clear or ride the storm to the end?

"Some people know his identity," Varo said from the side. "His connection to Clan Sharva'Zi is known by a few after the events at the auction. What should we do?"

Catheya glanced at her follower, his sleeve hanging empty after the amputation, before she looked out the window for a whole minute. Finally, she made her decision.

“We’ll keep the course. Arcaz Black will be coming our way as soon as he’s done with whatever he’s up to, and I want to have both locations confirmed so we can send him on his merry way as quickly as possible.”

“That guy might be powerful, but he’s trouble,” Qirai reminded her.

“The fate of our clan is a weak candle in the wind. If something isn’t done, it will be snuffed out before long. The Supreme Elder is barely staving off the madness, and I’m sure there are a few neighbors more than willing to push him into an early grave,” Catheya said. “Arcaz Black is like a beacon of providence. His mere existence can change the wheels of fate. How can we give up on it at this stage? Who knows, whatever he’s doing might even be at the behest of my ancestor.”

“Elusive maneuvers?” Varo ventured.

“Exactly.” Catheya nodded as she took out a mask that fused with her face.

It felt like maggots burrowed into her flesh, and soon her pristine features had been replaced by a much squarish face. The mask was gone, and anyone who looked into her eyes would no longer see the abyssal orbs, but rather two icy-pale eyes that emitted a freezing cold.

She wasn’t the only one who changed, and large scars started to appear across Qirai’s body. Her teeth fell out the next moment as her jaw grew, replaced with sharp fangs. A long rat tail sprang out next, and her right arm grew almost 30% compared to the original. Anyone looking at her couldn’t possibly think of her as anything but a Corpselord guardian.

As for Varo, he was the last one to worry about. He had not one but three ways to change his appearance, and together they formed a disguise that would fool everyone but the absolute peak scouts.

“I hate this form,” Qirai muttered as she scratched her snout.

“You look very powerful,” Catheya laughed.

“I’ll give that guy a good talking to when he comes back,” Qirai grunted as she started getting used to moving around with a tail.

“Will Mr. Black return and risk being discovered?” Varo asked from the side. “Waiting out the trial and staying hidden seems more appropriate.”

“My intuition tells me he’ll come,” Catheya slowly said. “I think the two spots he’s had us look for are the true reason he entered the Twilight Ocean in the first place. Besides, does that guy seem like someone who would be content with hiding in a cave for another two and a half years?”

Qirai snorted in response as Varo nodded in agreement.

“What do you want us to do?” Varo asked.

“We’ll head toward that temporary settlement we heard about,” Catheya said. “We need to expand our charts since I have no idea where to look from here on out. Besides, we might learn what’s actually going on over there. I’m sure that whatever that unlucky star did ruffled some feathers.”

“I wonder what those two hotshots are thinking right now,” Qirai snorted as she startled dismantling the array flags of their hideout. “I bet that princeling and crazy bloodsucker are grinding their teeth.”

“He really knows how to keep life interesting.” Catheya laughed.

Uona threw away the emptied husk of the cultivator she’d previously caught, a surge of pain and humiliation burning in her heart.

Why wouldn’t they regrow?

No matter how much Blood Essence she gathered, her limbs refused to regenerate no matter how many times she activated her bloodline ability. Even wounds left by Hegemons would slowly regrow, but something was wrong this time around. That ball of destruction the Draugr had unleashed, was it truly Oblivion? Something like that shouldn't be possible to wield by an E-grade warrior.

Did Arcaz Black carry one of those seeds? She'd heard about warriors being infected by fragments that carried the ancient curse, but this wasn't how it should work. Those warriors were never in control of the seeds, the seeds were in control of them. Even the powerful could only seal them away, never taking advantage of the energies within.

Was Arcaz Black somehow unique in that sense? Was it something else?

That ant! Uona gritted her teeth as she paced back and forth, her gait only made possible by turning a blood servant into a temporary limb. Everything had gone awry because of that encounter. Not only had he stolen her spot, his name sitting on top of her head, reminding her of the humiliation, now the situation might even affect her family's plans.

Their nascent branch was starting to rise, with two Autarchs holding down the fort at home and at the Eternal Court. With a third, they could send one to the front lines, becoming a core contributor to the war against those bald bastards. The number of resources that would bring to their family would be enough to stabilize their foundation as a High-grade branch, and they would be able to work toward the peak from there.

And now she looked like this. The other Chosen already looked down on her because of her lacking heritage, even though almost half of them had worse talent than she did. What if she came back looking like this? The walls of her submersible cracked as they were blanketed by Uona's fury.

She slowly calmed down as she started considering her next step.

Part of her wanted to leave and have Grandpa Nether heal her wounds, but she couldn't face him like this. She'd accomplished most of her tasks, but the most important parts were still left undone. The Blood Effigy would need at least another year to grow. Now with Arcaz Black entering the fray... This was not over. A pureblood Draugr like that couldn't be completely unknown.

"Where is the closest settlement?" Uona asked as she turned toward her guide.

"Mistress, settlements often spring up around exits, though it is a bit early for that now. However, there should be one settlement a month's travel from our current location called Glory's Rest. It is a mountain that has been turned into a town over millions of years, its features remaining intact between trials," the blood servant answered with a bow.

Uona nodded in understanding as she tapped her nail against the table. However, she frowned when she saw the blood servant take a hesitant step forward.

"What is it?"

"Mistress, I might know something of importance," the blood servant said, glancing at her wound.

"Oh?" Uona said, not really caring about what a thrall might consider important.

She still indicated for the blood servant to speak up. He'd helped her immensely over the past month, and without his knowledge, she might not even have surpassed Ykrodas on the ladder. It wasn't that the princeling was stronger, but he had brought a whole army to help, the coward.

She even felt a bit bad about refining this Troker into a blood servant. But the regret was fleeting. How else would she be able to bring him to the depths of the Mystic Realm without him succumbing to the atmosphere? She'd take the thrall back to the clan after this was over, and that alone would more than make up for making him an eternal servant to her clan.

"That terrifying energy in mistress' wound. There is a place in the Twilight Ocean where a similar aura can be

found,” Troker said.

“Is there now?” Uona said, a smile spreading across her face.

“Who! Who the hell is Arcaz Black?” Ykrodas roared with fury as he smashed a wineglass. “Where did this man come from!”

He couldn’t believe what he was seeing. He’d memorized every single name on the ladder, and this man had never once appeared.

“He is not mentioned in our or the local missives. He’s not even in the whole tournament registry,” Orbot said after scanning his memories. “Either a hidden elite or an outsider with a ticket. Judging by the name, I’d guess undead.”

“Ask around. He’s not necessarily unknown even if he’s not in any missives.” Ykrodas frowned. “His points don’t make any sense. What do you make of it?”

“According to my estimates, he’s not a threat to Your Majesty,” Orbot said. “I think this man has one Middle Branch at best. Perhaps even lower.”

“That’s it? He can’t possibly have gained so many points through slaughter.” Ykrodas frowned.

“My best guess is he’s encountered some opportunity. Young master gained fifty thousand points from ingesting that constitution-augmenting treasure, and our enemies have harvested quite a few points by destroying nodes. I think this fellow managed to stumble upon some sort of opportunity that unlocked a large section of the tapestry,” the advisor mused.

“Makes sense.” Ykrodas nodded. “He wasn’t even on the ladder before.”

“Your Majesty is absolutely right. If anything, this is an opportunity for us,” Orbot added. “That Eternal Clan lass is difficult to deal with, but she seems to have encountered some

difficulty considering her points have barely grown since the last tally. As for this Arcasz Black, we just need to kill him. With the bounty on his head, Your Majesty can reach the top in one go.”

“Easier said than done,” Ykrodas sighed. “That person could be hiding anywhere, probably inside the chasm itself. Why would he pop his head out at this juncture? He has a good chance at maintaining his lead all through the trial and will get the third spot at worst.”

“I doubt the Ruthless Heavens would let someone just hide out and claim the rewards,” Orbot said as he tapped the table. “But I do have an idea to move events in our favor.”

“What have you cooked up this time?” Ykrodas smiled, his densely inscribed face turning into a fearsome mask.

“We, unfortunately, don’t have the means to find him as things stand. But I did happen to hear that a certain Core Disciple of the Radiant Temple is touring a region a week’s travel away. Someone who is a member of the Constellation Hall,” Orbot said with a pointed look.

“A Numerologist?” Ykrodas exclaimed, his eyes lighting up. “That would work. But catching those wily bastards is easier said than done.”

“That is absolutely true.” Orbot nodded. “Your Majesty would have to personally make a move on this one, I think.”

“That’s fine by me. I didn’t know Constellation Hall was mixed up in this mess. No wonder we’ve had so much trouble completing our tasks.”

“We’re alone in this struggle.” Orbot nodded with a sigh. “Both the temple and the unliving want the ascension to proceed. The temple even seems to have an agreement with the target. Perhaps he’s planning on joining them for sanctuary after this is over with, taking the mantle of another Grand Deacon.”

“They wouldn’t dare,” Ykrodas said with a shake of his head. “It would disrupt the balance.”

“An agent then, a rogue Autarch causing chaos among the temple’s enemies while staying clear of their domains,” Orbot said. “Might be even more useful than a proper member.”

Ykrodas grunted in agreement. That man had caused so much trouble while still a Monarch, and he didn’t seem to have any compunctions about slaughtering the weak. Just how much Havarok blood would flow through the sector if that lunatic had his way?

“Completing the task is ultimately more important than my ranking,” Ykrodas said. “How is the progress of the seals?”

“Should be just about finished.”

“Let’s take a look,” Ykrodas said, and they ventured into the catacombs beneath the settlement.

Down below, a massive hall stretched with almost five hundred warriors sitting in orderly lines. Surrounding them were fifty Array Masters continuously forming sigils as they chanted in unison. The ground was covered with runes, and new ones joined them every second as they crawled toward the warriors.

The runes then climbed onto the warriors’ bodies, joining thousands just like them. Ykrodas knew from experience that the process was extremely painful, but the warriors didn’t so much as move a muscle while they were being engraved. Ykrodas truthfully didn’t know if these people could feel pain any longer. Feel anything, for that matter.

“Sacrificial beacons. Not living, not dead,” Orbot said as he looked down at the native deathsworn with a complex gaze.

“This is their conviction. Steeled warriors willing to become swords aimed at those who threaten their homeland,” Ykrodas said, his eyes looking across the hall. “We’d be lucky to have such warriors in our ranks. Have the others send them out the moment the process is finished. Let’s go find that Numerologist.”

Alvod looked at the rippling tapestry that stretched across the horizon, a frown marring his face. Why was joy so often marred with sorrow? Had he pushed the boundaries too far, to the point that the Ruthless Heavens finally sent a warning? He knew meddling with a trial was to mess with the core commandments of the System, and there were bound to be repercussions if he overplayed his hand.

However, his brows relaxed as the tapestry calmed, the pressure of the Heavens lessening. Left behind was a more complete tapestry, like a stubborn imperfection that had finally been smoothed out. Something had obviously changed, and not for the better.

His eyes turned to one of the three whirlpools far beneath his position. He could feel how the flow had become far too disorderly to properly make use of. If things stayed like this, it would become far more inconvenient to harvest that power when the Heavens truly came crashing down. Alvod sent a mental command to his sentinel, his brows rising in shock when he couldn't get a response.

It wasn't hard to put two and two together. What had Thram done to draw the ire of the System? She should be safe from any restraints, considering she was a native Alvod had raised and nurtured for thirty thousand years. She also knew better than to mess with the funneling array, especially this close to the fruition of the plans.

Someone must have figured out a way to damage his array, even when it was placed in the depths of the Twilight Chasm. Anger burned in his chest as he pictured the face of the Havarok emperor. It had to be them. No one else should want to destroy that particular array.

His eyes turned to the chalice. He gritted his teeth as he extracted nine drops before quickly infusing them into nine flags. The flags flew out in an instant, each taking a specific position in front of the tapestry. Alvod's aura exploded as his world projection emerged, a world of endless tides that crashed against the flags.

As the tide rose and fell, a few small engravings, each resembling something left behind by the birth of the universe itself, were added to the nine flags. It was the Primal Dao being slowly transformed into the core of the array.

Nine drops and a lot of effort would delay him for half a year. Fury smoldered in Alvod's chest, but he didn't let it affect his concentration as he recreated the flags that had been lost. With each crashing of the tides, he felt how his enemies gained another day to complete their schemes. As the tides receded, his eyes turned to the chalice, now far more unfilled compared to earlier.

This was ultimately just another bump in his path. He'd survived far worse. Thram should wake up soon enough, and he would get the whole story then. Alvod's scowl started to ease, his confident smile once more making an appearance.

If anyone knew how to bide their time before exacting overwhelming revenge, it was him.

GATHERING STRENGTH

Zac woke up from his comatose state, eyes feeling like they were full of gravel, and every part of his body hurt. He swallowed another healing pill with a grimace and stowed the void beast organ. It was shriveled, like an oversized raisin compared to when he bought it. Zac guessed it had lost more than 80% of its remaining energy while he was unconscious.

Part of it was probably because of him absorbing some of it while unconscious, but most had likely been eroded by the extremely dense ambient energy in the tunnels. It was a bit of a blow, but not the end of the world. Some of the energy that entered **[Void Heart]** was always turned into Void Energy. Certainly, it wasn't nearly as efficient as absorbing the energy from the organ, but it was enough as long as he didn't constantly use it.

The tunnels were silent, with no immediate threats. Zac opted to go over the situation before anything else. He opened his quest screen since he hadn't had a proper chance to go over things before.

Reciprocity (Unique, Limited): Surrender a Glimpse of Chaos. Reward: – (0/1) [590d]

[NOTE: Failure to comply will result in loss of 10 levels and one random Dao.]

Eight days.

He'd been unconscious eight days after almost becoming a treat for the enormous snake. Even then, his body was in a pretty wretched state. That wasn't to say there hadn't been any

gains from the ordeal. He'd gained another huge chunk of contribution points, further cementing his lead on the ladder.

He had no idea what the source of the points was though. Just maiming the octopus wasn't enough. Zac's thoughts turned to those mysterious mountains that had risen from the depths of the chasm to assist the enormous snake, and he felt it might be connected to them. They'd clearly contained a lot of mysterious energy, and had in a way been destroyed because of his actions.

Another gain was that he managed to push [**Abyssal Phase**] from Middle to High-mastery. Being chased by a potential Beast Emperor was clearly an effective method to squeeze out one's potential, though Zac definitely wouldn't try something like that again.

With the void beast organ mostly depleted, Zac crushed a Supreme Nexus Crystal as he started using [**Surging Vitality**]. Progress was slow, as the skill worked best when powering it with kill energy. Even if he got a good chunk of kill energy from his complicity to the octopus's death, it had long since seeped out of his body.

The slow recuperation at least gave him some time to reorient himself and plan his next step. The situation had been pretty complicated before, and things only got more convoluted after he managed to mess with the Twilight Lord. With his ladder position being exposed to the world, he was probably not only the target of Uona, but also the other top Rankers.

Zac wasn't as worried about them as he was about the Twilight Lord. It didn't take a genius to realize the elusive master of Twilight Harbor was mixed up with the odd events in this trial, and the formation flags Zac inadvertently destroyed during his bloodline breakthrough might have been integral to his plans. After all, they weren't only planted so deep in the chasm that no trial-taker could mess with them, but they even had that terrifying guardian beast.

Not only that, Zac had been forced into making a deal with the System, and he knew the odds of coming out on top in

such an endeavor were pretty slim. Certainly, Zac didn't need some quest to tell him to get the two Remnants. He'd already planned to do so as soon as he got out of the Twilight Chasm.

Before, it had only been an opportunity to become stronger. If it didn't work out, then fine, but now he found himself with his back against the wall. Again. It had been possible for him to sneak out through one of the exits if things proved too volatile on the surface, but that was out of the question with the looming punishment.

There was also the issue of the Glimpse of Chaos. While he'd planned on snatching the two Remnants, he hadn't planned on using them to conjure another of those Chaos Patterns. Not only had it messed with his pathways last time, just gazing on it almost destroyed his soul.

Besides, the scene was extremely attention-grabbing. Last time he'd at least been inside the Tower of Eternity, where not even an Autarch could spy on him. If he unleashed a Chaos Pattern in this place, there was a good chance someone would notice and possibly even record the events.

There wasn't much to do about it. He refused to lose one of his Daos. Seeing as it was a punishment from the System, Zac doubted he'd be able to simply "regrow" the Dao with some treasures in case it was taken from him. The question was how to complete the mission without getting himself killed or his real identity exposed.

Luckily, the System wouldn't send the repo man for his Dao Fragment just yet. He had almost two years before the time limit, and he was already planning on being long gone from this place by then. It also gave him some wiggle room to prepare for what waited on the surface.

There was no reason to leave the Twilight Chasm just yet. His scheduled rendezvous with Catheya was more than half a year away, and he was better off using that time to empower himself than setting out as is. Forming a Dao Branch was his best option to gain an edge against the top contestants of the trial, although that goal was all but impossible at the moment.

Just a few months had passed since evolving all three of his Fragments, and he was severely lacking the foundation to immediately push toward a branch. It was one thing if he planned to fuse his Daos, but this time he was aiming for evolutions. That meant he would have to essentially double his insights in one go.

That didn't mean he was out of options. There was still his soul, and he was thankfully ensconced in the perfect place to improve it. Doing so would bring all kinds of benefits, the most important of which was the ability to better withstand the Remnants. He wasn't too worried if it was just the one set, but he had no idea what would happen with multiple sets in his body.

The only point of reference he had was the Peak E-grade cultivator who caused the downfall of the Eastern Trigram Sect back in the Hunt. He'd absorbed two Splinters of Oblivion and subsequently been reduced to an extremely powerful lunatic. In contrast, Anzonil's disciple had been able to withstand the madness for almost a decade after having absorbed one set.

The difference was remarkable, leaving too many variables involved to draw any clear conclusions. But it was clear that the effect of the Remnants increased the more of them you swallowed. Anything he could do to better deal with such a situation was of utmost importance. Besides, the stronger his soul became, the better he would be able to utilize his Dao in battle.

His crude Dao Braids were far superior to just infusing one of his Dao Branches, but it was a crutch that he needed to be in an excitable state. Like when he fought the octopus for the braids to form fast enough. Another reincarnation would hopefully shore up that weakness, allowing him to freely use Dao Braids in battle.

Having decided on his course, Zac spent the next five days getting back into shape, mixed with running his Soul Cultivation Arrays to stave off the Twilight Energy. Resetting his bones wasn't too hard with his constitution, but there was

quite a bit of the foreign energies stubbornly left in his body after his frantic escape, mostly the Dao from the snake.

Though the [**Purity of the Void**] node was working hard at expelling it, there was simply a difference of level between the two, making progress slow. Still, most of the damage from the two berserking treasures had been dealt with while he was unconscious, and he'd regained most of his fighting strength.

Completely recovering would take a bit longer, but he'd already wasted over two weeks. He could technically stay here and cultivate, but it would cost unnecessary resources. Gaining [**Void Zone**] allowed him to stay farther down than he could before, but there wasn't much of a point doing so. The Twilight Energy was essentially poison, and exposing himself to more than he had to was just foolish, especially now that he'd lost his source of Void Energy.

Besides, he was too close for comfort to the area where he encountered the snake. In a perfect world, he'd want to set off to a completely different section of the Twilight Chasm, but he'd settle for putting a few days' worth of travel between himself and this place, in case it decided to come knocking after recovering.

Before leaving, Zac doused himself in a healthy amount of a gray mixture. It made him look like he'd rolled around in a pile of ash, but it was something far more expensive. It was a compound that helped weaken any potential Karmic threads, a more potent version of what he'd gotten from Catheya back in the Tower of Eternity.

He hadn't planned on using the compound until just before leaving the Twilight Ocean, but an extra application seemed pertinent after meeting the Twilight Lord's guardian. The mixture gradually dried across his body until it looked like pieces of clay that fell off one by one. Only then was he ready to leave the area.

The tunnel system he found himself in was just one confusing maze, and having run through them in a muddled state didn't make things any better. He simply kept going deeper into the mountain away from where he came,

occasionally changing paths into one that seemed to lead toward the surface. All the while he kept his **[Void Zone]** going, since traveling without it while keeping the Twilight Energy at bay was extremely slow. It forced him to occasionally top up from his already dwindling reserves of Void Energy, but time was of the essence.

The area was just like the tunnels below the Living Pulse. Some of the sections were submerged, whereas others were kept dry thanks to a number of Spiritual Herbs producing gases. And it wasn't always oxygen, as Zac found out. He suddenly stumbled, vision swimming as he breathed a sweet aroma.

His eyes widened, and he quickly swallowed an antidote pill before he dove into the water of a nearby tunnel.

It was just in time, as two previously lifeless roots barely missed snatching him up, moving with enough speed to cause small cracks in the air. Missing once wasn't enough to deter them though, and they dove into the tunnel after Zac. His mind was a bit muddled by the noxious mists, but not even Poison Masters would have as many points in Vitality as he did.

Coupled with his hidden node and the antidote pill, he was almost instantly back in fighting condition, and **[Verun's Bite]** ripped through the roots as he made his way back into the poisonous tunnel. The source of the poison became apparent soon enough. There were a number of small flowers on the very roots that tried to snatch him.

The perpetrator wasn't even in the tunnel itself, and Zac followed a series of increasingly frantic roots hundreds of meters into a nearby tunnel where a massive tangled mess of a plant commanded most of the free space. It was a twenty-meter-tall ball of squirming roots, with appendages stretching into over a dozen pathways.

Zac wasn't sure if it had planted itself in an intersection or had actually dug the paths itself, but this was no time to worry about that, as over fifty poisonous vines and roots shot toward him. The power of the plant seemed to be the equivalent of a bottom-rung Beast King. Zac mostly unphased. He was

currently in his human form, and his class was almost tailor-made for this type of enemy.

The large cave was soon filled with another source of verdure, the spectral forest of [**Hatchetman's Spirit**]. Zac's already sharp senses from [**Forester's Constitution**] were supercharged, and he wove back and forth between the roots as large blades formed like leaves slashed into the frenzied roots.

It was nature versus nature in a ruthless quest for supremacy. Even in Zac's weakened state, the roots and vines had no way to reach him as [**Verun's Bite**] wove a tapestry of death around him. However, the poisonous mists were growing increasingly dense, to the point that he was starting to have trouble dealing with it.

Zac threw out five talismans, which erupted into a conflagration of white-hot flames that consumed the whole cave. However, the flames didn't linger, but rather consumed the whole place before disappearing in a flash. The tangle was pretty much unscathed by the flames, but most of the toxic pollen was gone, incinerated by the offensive talismans.

Zac took the opportunity and started pushing toward the core of the plant. He'd already cut enough roots to make a year's worth of firewood, yet they kept coming. Just like a Beast King, a plant of this grade contained an immense amount of energy, and would most likely be able to keep conjuring roots long after Zac had exhausted himself. He needed to strike at its core.

His finishing skills would probably be able to take the thing out in one go, but completely shredding the plant was a waste. This was a proper D-grade Spiritual Herb, and some part of it was bound to be useful or valuable. Zac instead waded into the depths of the tangle.

A frantic struggle ensued between Zac and the Spirit Herb. One minute later, the roots wildly shuddered before they lifelessly slumped to the ground. Zac crawled out of the mass, an odd seedlike item in hand.

It was around thirty centimeters across, and was once the source of all the roots. There was a large crack across its surface, left after Zac slammed his axe into it. It had released a lot of the stored energy, but Zac simply found no other way to kill the thing. He put the core in a jade box before stowing it, quickly leaving in case a more powerful beast or plant was attracted by the noise.

Zac kept a slow pace over the next few days, taking the time to clean out the tunnels of anything of value. There was quite a bit of wildlife in the tunnels, most various types of insects at the Peak of E-grade. He did meet two Beast Kings, but was only forced to fight one, with the other one refusing to leave its nest. The latter one got to live, and the former was cleaved in two by **[Rapturous Divide]**.

He did gain a few thousand contribution points through his efforts, but none of the treasures appeared as valuable as the things he looted on the mountain peaks farther down in the depths. Still, he had quite a few herbs that would most likely raise some eyebrows in Twilight Harbor, many of which weren't even listed in his information missives.

More impressively, he stumbled upon a vast submerged cave where almost four thousand Twilight Plants grew. He harvested every single fruit, increasing his store tenfold. He'd already given up on the Fate-Plucking Ladder, but these things were still pretty useful even outside of the competition.

The ambient energy in the tunnels was gradually decreasing, but it was still far too powerful to deal with without using **[Void Zone]** while traveling, and the organ was fast running dry. He initially wanted to travel a while longer, but it was time to start looking for a good spot to cultivate. As long as he stopped, he would be able to withstand the Twilight Energy easier, since he could simply crush Nexus Crystals.

For some reason, the ambient energy was actually increasing rather than decreasing, even though he kept ascending through the tunnels. The reason soon became apparent as he spotted a crude, golden-green crystal embedded in the tunnel wall. He'd stumbled upon a Twilight Crystal vein.

Most people would be pretty happy to find money growing out of the walls, but Zac swore in annoyance as he increased his pace, flashing through the tunnels in hopes of making it through the energy-dense area as soon as possible. However, he suddenly stopped after thirty minutes, spotting something curious: a small crack in the wall.

The crack itself wasn't very interesting, but the fact that Twilight Energy was continuously being dragged into the opening was interesting. Was the density lower on the other side of this wall? Zac swapped over to his Draugr form, activated [**Abyssal Phase**], and shot in. The wall was actually hundreds of meters thick, but he moved through it in a second.

He returned to his physical form the moment the area opened up, and his eyes widened when he looked at the brightly illuminated chamber. The walls were completely covered in Twilight Crystals, every single one of them of Supreme-grade and at least as large as a football. There were tens of thousands of them, a fortune for most E-grade cultivators.

Yet the ambient energy was far lower compared to outside, and it was all because of a massive crystal in the middle of the room. It was as large as Zac was and covered in esoteric markings that seemed to have formed naturally. More importantly, it continuously absorbed the energy that the Supreme Twilight Crystals exuded, causing a rapid drop in the invasive ambient energy.

Zac wasn't exactly sure what he was looking at, though he knew two things for sure. First, that thing was a treasure. Something even greater than the items he looted on the mountain peaks.

Second, he'd found the perfect cultivation cave.

MIND'S EYE

The humongous crystal was like an emperor among its subjects. It wasn't hard to see it wasn't actually a Twilight Crystal, but more like an oversized tiger's eye gemstone or an agate if anything. He didn't immediately approach, but he first scoured his information packages to find something similar.

Eventually, he found something promising, though he looked up at the man-sized gem with some hesitation. There was a rare gemstone called **[Mind's Eye Agate]** that looked similar and could sometimes appear in energy-dense crystal mines. However, the examples in the missive were no larger than his pinky, and they didn't have the markings of the humongous stone in front of him.

The normal agates were popular additions to jewelry or prayer mats, as they emitted a weak aura that could help calm one's mind just like spiritual incense. This thing was obviously causing a similar ambiance, just on a far greater scale. It gobbled up the ambient energy and in turn exuded an aura that covered half the cave.

Seeing as his danger sense was completely quiet, Zac edged inside the field to test its effect. He was instantly filled with a sense of calm and stability, and he could feel how his mental energy was rapidly being restored. The same effect as if he'd crushed a dozen Soul Crystals going by how quickly his mind recovered. This was absolutely perfect for his goal. Zac started to set up array after array to prepare the area.

This chamber would become his cultivation cave for the foreseeable future, and he needed to protect it. First came the

defensive arrays at the heart of the cave, followed by observation arrays keeping watch in the miles and miles of tunnels, mainly in the direction of the chasm and the surface. Finally, he took out some furniture and placed it at the edge of the cave before placing his prayer mat right in front of the marvelous gem.

The final setup might not be as tailor-made for his needs as his cultivation cave back on Earth, but it more than made up for it in the raw energies available. Even with the mutated **[Mind's Eye Agate]** sucking up half of the Twilight Energy, the ambient energy left behind was far higher than anywhere on Earth, including on Port Atwood.

It was actually to the point his body couldn't completely deal with it, with more and more Twilight Energy gradually filling his body the moment he deactivated **[Void Zone]**. However, the effect was nowhere near what he'd been forced to endure while climbing the mountain peaks just a few weeks ago, and cracking a Supreme Nexus Crystal allowed him to be shielded from the ambient energy for almost two minutes.

With **[Void Heart]** constantly absorbing the invasive energies, his stockpile of Void Energy was gradually being restored, though it took almost a day for his reserves to be topped off. In either case, he had more than enough crystals to last him up to two years, and he would even be able to recoup the loss by looting the chamber upon exiting.

Seeing as everything was set up, Zac took out the intricate array disk and started up his soul cultivation. This time he wasn't just cultivating to protect himself from the environment, so he did everything he could to make the process as efficient as possible. That meant cultivating opposing alignments, with his Draugr side absorbing life, and his human side absorbing death.

Furthermore, he started to empower the cycles with his Daos to increase the effect. A stream of pure Dao entered the small array disk along with the flood of mental energy, and Zac instantly felt a sense of weakness. The drain was ten times that of infusing the array before the first reincarnation, and

small beads of sweat started to run down his head just as he completed the first cycle.

The gains were just as powerful as during the first reincarnation though, and a storm of death entered the black ocean, to the point his whole soul aperture shuddered a bit from the sudden and rapid infusion of mental energy. He still wasn't at his limit, and he infused the second circuit with his Dao as well, followed by the third.

However, Zac wasn't certain he'd be able to complete all nine revolutions if he kept going this way, and from the fourth revolution onward, he cultivated normally. The hours passed, and by the time the ninth revolution finished, Zac was barely able to restrain the deathly ocean in his mind. He needed to use a decent amount of his mental energy to just keep his soul aperture from going out of control, and he started to cultivate the second set of revolutions to restore balance.

The hours passed as one cycle replaced the previous, and the depths of death were gradually being countered by the peaks of life. The ninth revolution finished, and the two opposing concepts reached equilibrium. However, balance didn't mean harmony. An unprecedented storm erupted in his mind, with the core of his soul constantly pelted by the raging waves.

Zac grimaced as his vision blurred from a soul-rending pain. He gritted his teeth and endured. Infusing three revolutions from the get-go was overdoing it a bit. Truthfully, he'd only managed to push himself that far thanks to the aura of the large gemstone, but he had faith in the resilience of his soul.

Besides, he had something prepared for a situation like this.

The storm continued for almost an hour, at which point small hairline cracks covered the surface of the pristine core in the heart of his soul—the effect of overextending oneself. Zac ate a soul-mending pill and took out a stalk of shimmering grass. It came from the small patch he discovered on the

mountain peak the other day, and his soul screamed with hunger as the stalk gave off an enticing aroma.

Zac looked at the eighty-centimeter stalk for a second before he shrugged and crammed it into his mouth. Taking a Spiritual Herb like this was wasteful at best, and suicidal at worst. Many herbs contained dangerous and chaotic energies that interfered with the medicinal efficacy you wanted or even poisons that required refinement to get rid of.

However, it wasn't like Zac had an Alchemist hiding in his sleeve, and his hidden nodes were more than able to deal with chaotic energy and poisons alike. Besides, Zac believed his danger sense would warn him if the stalk was actually deadly. Thankfully, the stalk contained such pure energy, it could almost be considered a natural treasure. Zac soon felt a soothing stream entering his soul aperture.

It was like a warm gust from spring swept the gloom of winter away, and a haze of radiant green light spread across the waters of his mind. The radiant sphere at the heart of his soul was a sun-parched desert, and it greedily swallowed the light, prompting the hairline cracks to rapidly close up as impurities were expelled.

His Soul Core became an insatiable vortex as more and more energy was absorbed until things finally calmed down. And Zac had to say, the result was tremendous, with his soul having gained at least 5% strength from one session. Some of it came from the cultivation method itself, whereas a little bit was added by the soothing aura of the **[Mind's Eye Agate]**.

But the star of the show was obviously the unnamed stalk of spiritual grass he'd eaten.

It was just a stalk, yet it improved his soul more than a couple of weeks of running his Soul Strengthening Array would. Zac gave it a thought before he took out another one, except the effect was far worse the second time around. The energy entered his Mental Aperture just the same, but it almost looked like his Soul Core was satiated.

Most of the emerald haze was instead swallowed by **[Spiritual Void]**, replenishing the stores he expended when

attacking the octopus in his frenzy. Zac wanted to keep going, but there wasn't much he could do for his soul now that the revolution had finished. There was something else though, and a massive bone thumped on the ground, its weight enough to make the whole cavern shudder.

It was the Treasure Bone he found stuck between two rocks the other day, and Verun keened with hunger as Zac took out the axe from his Spatial Ring. A series of incessant roars echoed out in Zac's mind, and he smiled as he swung the weapon straight into the bone, deeply embedding the edge into the marrow.

A joyful roar followed those filled with hunger, and while Zac couldn't see anything with the naked eye, he could sense the Spirit Tool had already started extracting the essence from the bone. As for how long it would take, Zac had no idea. It'd taken it weeks to absorb the dragon's blood, and Zac guessed this bone came from some powerful Beast King to survive in the harsh environment of the Twilight Chasm.

Zac followed the transformation as he recuperated from the soul-strengthening cultivation, occasionally crushing a crystal and feeding **[Love's Bond]** a Twilight Fruit. Twelve hours passed, at which point Zac started up his cultivation session again. This turned into a daily routine, and three weeks passed in this manner.

In those weeks, he'd made some discoveries. It turned out the spirit grass was reusable, but only once every five days or so. If he ate them any quicker, he would waste a lot of its efficacy. Meanwhile, the agate was seemingly inexhaustible, constantly releasing its aura. Zac couldn't wait to place that thing in the middle of his cultivation cave back home, perfecting it even further.

The Zac before integration would have been bored out of his mind after sitting around for weeks on end, but making gradual improvements to one's cultivation was pretty addictive, to the point Zac doubted he would ever tire of the feeling. Besides, he had something else to look forward to, and it was finally time as crackling sounds echoed throughout the cave.

Zac curiously walked over after finishing his cultivation session, and noticed large cracks covered the surface of the sturdy Treasure Bone. He gripped the hilt of **[Verun's Bite]**, and exclaimed in surprise over the weightlessness as he lifted weapon and bone alike.

The Treasure Bone had weighed as much as a tank before, but Zac guessed it only weighed something like fifty kilos now that its essence had been completely extracted. A powerful roar echoed through the cave, and Zac smiled as he took out a couple of bottles. Whole rivers of blood were poured out as Zac uncorked the stoppers, and the Spirit Tool swallowed it all to the last drop.

Some of the blood had been collected by himself during the trial, but most had been purchased in Twilight Harbor. **[Verun's Bite]** wasn't unique in desiring High-grade blood, and it was useful in everything from cooking to pill making. With the world disks of the harbor holding whole ecosystems, including millions of Beast Kings, there was no lack of supply of blood, to the point it was even cheaper than Beast Cores.

Soon enough, a sanguine crystal formed, with the beascrafted axe suspended in the middle. Zac grinned from ear to ear as he carried the large crystal to another spot beneath the agate, in case its aura could help Verun finish its transformation quicker. It had been a while since the axe had evolved, but that bone alone had been enough to push it toward becoming a High E-grade Spirit Tool.

The evolution probably wouldn't bring any great increase in power since it wasn't a fundamental evolution like becoming a D-grade Spirit Tool. But another ability would be unlocked, which might prove useful in the future.

Seeing that his weapon was moving forward, Zac felt it was about time he did the same himself. His body was back to tip-top shape, and the foreign energies were mostly expelled. There might be some of it lingering in various nooks and crannies of his body, but if it was, then it was too fine for **[Spiritual Anchor]** to spot it.

In either case, he was ready to test something he'd been waiting on for so long: the efficacy of the **[Stone of Hope]**.

He had long been at the precipice of gaining a level since using the pills back in the Hollowtongue Mountains, and he took out a Beast Core with anticipation. A storm of wild energies entered his hand as he started to absorb the stored energies. **[Void Heart]** instantly woke up, each beat of the node creating an intractable suction as more and more energy was dragged inside.

The process continued for ten minutes, at which point the hidden node was satiated. It wouldn't take long for **[Void Heart]** to refine this type of energy, so Zac quickly stowed the core and steadied his mind. Next, the small vial containing the **[Chainbreaking Pills]** appeared in his hand.

Zac swallowed the pill that emitted a pungent odor, and grimaced as he felt a sickly and murky gunk spread through his body, covering his nodes and pathways in what almost felt like spiritual excrement. However, he did feel the tightness of the nodes loosening a bit, and it was just in time.

A surge of pure energy was expelled by the hidden node in his heart. Normally, Zac would expel this energy, but this time he seized control of it as he pushed it toward his midriff. The next node was located on the side a bit lower than his navel, and if the explosion was too bad, it would mean a whole lot of intestines getting destroyed.

More importantly, quite a few of his pathways intersected in that area since the Cultivator's Core would eventually be placed beneath his navel. A node exploding there would leave him severely weakened for months, which was why it was so important for him that his two prepared methods worked.

The node was already at the precipice, and the surge of energy was more than enough to blast the node wide open. A sense of trepidation filled his heart as he sensed the familiar signs of the node being about to explode. This kind of pain was something that stayed with you like a mental scar. He remembered those days in the sickbed back in Port Atwood as clear as day.

However, reality suddenly shifted, almost like stepping into a dream. The gems embedded in the walls around him emitted a fuzzy luster, and sounds became muted as if his perception were turned down. Zac looked down at his hands, worried for a second that the **[Chainbreaking Pills]** had hallucinogenic effects, but he immediately realized what was going on.

It was the **[Stone of Hope]** that hung from his neck.

Previously, the inlaid gemstone in the necklace had been completely inert. Now it was emitting a strong white light that held a tremendous effect on its surroundings. Zac didn't have time to enjoy the state he was in though, as the changes in his body continued.

An explosion erupted, and Zac was beset by a soul-wrenching pain as flesh and ichor flew across the area. However, both the explosion and the subsequent agony were muted, as if taking place underwater. His surroundings shifted once more as the **[Stone of Hope]** shut itself off, leaving some of the agony behind in that dreamscape it wrought.

Zac took a shuddering breath as he activated the three Healing Brands on his back one by one, each generating a surge of vitality that helped patch up the flesh wound on his side. Physical wounds weren't really an issue, especially when there was no foreign Dao or other energy causing trouble. Spiritual wounds were far trickier to deal with, and Zac turned his sight inward to check up on the aftermath.

It only took a few seconds to see that the result was even better than he hoped. The unique treasure reduced the foundational damage by more than half in one go, which was the difference between being bedridden and just grievously wounded. His pathways were still a mess, but the damage to his foundation wasn't nearly as bad as before.

The **[Chainbreaking Pill]** and his necklace had worked perfectly together. The pill weakened the structural walls so the eruption wasn't as bad. Normally, bursting a node was like filling a gas canister with too much gas, resulting in a

tremendous explosion. With the **[Chainbreaking Pill]**, it was more like a balloon being filled with too much air.

The explosion was still there, but not nearly as dangerous. It was harder to understand what the **[Stone of Hope]** had done when it illuminated the cave with the ethereal light. The most similar experience he could remember was when he'd fought the Karmic Cultivator back in the Tower of Eternity.

It was almost like the stone conjured a dream version of himself, and it was this alternate-reality Zac who bore the brunt of the damage. He had no idea what kind of magic or Dao made something like that possible, but he wouldn't question it as long as it worked. Judging by the state of his body, a few weeks to a month of rest and he should be fine.

He would be hard-pressed to exhibit even a third of his combat strength in his current state, but it was far better than spending months in a sickbed too weak to even lift a finger. With this pace, he might even reach the Late-stage of E-grade before leaving his seclusion.

Having completed the task, Zac activated his **[Void Zone]** ability, getting a reprieve from the Twilight Energy as his body started to expel the gunk from the **[Chainbreaking Pill]**. A lot of the impurities had been expelled the moment his insides were plastered across the floor, but even more remained like a murky film over his pathways.

The thing was perhaps even worse than Catheya explained—a ball of condensed toxins that essentially poisoned you to make a breakthrough easier. The leftover gunk didn't really weaken him, but Zac found the compounds were extremely hard to remove, even with his **[Purity of the Void]**. His pathways were essentially covered in rust. He understood why no one would use something like this unless absolutely necessary.

Removing these toxins would waste more time than they would save and probably cost a lot of money as well. Most people would be forced to sit in purification arrays or medicinal baths designed to extract impurities. Even then, it would be difficult to remove it all, which would cause all

kinds of troubles down the line. Only a desperate mortal would eat something like this.

In either case, Zac found a method that would at least work during the Middle-stages of the E-grade. With that, his days turned into a blur, with half of it being dedicated to his soul and the other half to expelling toxins and preparing for the next breakthrough.

Days turned to weeks, and weeks turned to months. Zac almost forgot about the pressing issues of the outside world.

CATCHING UP

Emily's brows were furrowed from a mix of worry and hesitation as she hurried toward the Dao Repository. Something was going on, and not just with the emergency meeting the Stargazer had called. Something was different with the atmosphere in Port Atwood since she'd returned from the Tower of Eternity.

It wasn't just the seemingly endless number of resources that appeared out of nowhere just before she left. They were sent by Zac, according to Joanna, and it wasn't out of the norm for him to do things like that. Her own care package had allowed her to even match the performance of Thea Marshall, even though her class wasn't purely combat oriented.

There were some odd undercurrents. Weird glances like some core members of Port Atwood were keeping something from her. Were people already starting to get restless from Zac's absence? That definitely spelled trouble. After all, it was still a few years until Zac could be expected to return at the earliest.

And she knew that she wasn't strong enough to protect Zac's interests on her own in case others started to eye the vast fortunes of Port Atwood. No matter if it was those aliens from the lab or the demons, her level 87 cultivation wasn't enough to stop either of them. If a rebellion really was brewing, they might be in for a rough one.

Thankfully, there were the Valkyries, and Emily smiled when she saw Joanna waiting outside the gates of the Towers of Myriad Dao.

“You’re here,” Joanna said with a smile.

“Were you waiting for me?” Emily asked, confused.

“Well, you know how that guy is. Standing on the steps until the meeting starts is preferable to getting berated.” Joanna helplessly shrugged.

“He gets nicer if you visit more often,” Emily giggled as they walked inside, where the conference table was already set up between the towering statues.

“Well, we might need his assistance this time around, so please help keep him happy,” Joanna whispered.

“Just what’s going on?” Emily asked in a low volume, a bit surprised to see the old monkeyman and the gem turtle present.

Perhaps she’d let her thoughts run wild. From the looks of it, if these people were present, the meeting wasn’t related to rebellion. The group waiting in the Dao Repository still gave some indications that the matter was big. Apart from the two leaders of the Mystic Realm refugees, there were also Ilvere and Janos, along with Mr. Trang, Alyn, and Calrin, who looked as confused as she was.

However, none of the various officials of Port Atwood were present. Such as the mayors of the colonies or Adran. Neither were there any leaders of the civic departments, from agriculture to the tax bureau. It was clear everyone present was part of or represented the elite fighting force of Port Atwood. For them all to be gathered, there had to be an unexpected threat.

Was war really brewing?

“You’ll find out soon enough,” Joanna sighed when she saw Emily’s questioning glance. “We’re still waiting for the final members to arrive.”

“Others? Isn’t everyone here?” Emily asked as she looked around the room.

Joanna was about to open her mouth, but stopped herself and shook her head, indicating for Emily to wait. Emily rolled

her eyes and walked over to mingle.

It had been some time since she'd seen some of these familiar faces. She had stayed a full nine months in the Tower of Eternity and immediately entered seclusion in the Dao Chambers of the Atwood Academy upon her return. The building constructed by Kenzie had helped her consolidate her gains and push her second Dao, the Seed of Flow, to Peak mastery.

Emily already managed to evolve her Seed of Spark to Fragment of the Setting Sun, symbolizing the end of summer. Her water-based Dao would eventually form the foundation for spring, as she walked the path of nature. At least, that was the plan. Zac had talked about the importance of a path until she feared her ears would fall off. And it still felt as though she didn't resonate with her path like Zac did with his.

Well, whatever. She would figure it out sooner or later, and the more she traveled and experienced, the closer she would get to her truth. Her current progress had been enough to gain an Epic class she was happy with—**[E-Epic] Razor Sun**, a class that not only pushed her old shamanic skill set to the next level, but also added some devastating offensive capabilities that she felt herself missing in the Tower of Eternity.

She understood how Zac's crooked brain worked by now. The more she veered toward a support class to help him out, the less likely he would be to take her along on his adventures. He would feel he was risking her life for some buffs for himself, taking advantage of her. That was obviously stupid. Men often were.

She needed to prove her ability to protect herself first, after which she could figure out how to help him. For now, that meant figuring out what the hell was going on here. A series of steps dragged Emily out of her thoughts. Three people were arriving, each of them emitting an all-too-familiar aura.

The aura of death. Emily's eyes widened as a scorching halo erupted behind her back, and a fiery lizard two meters long appeared by her side, a familiar created with **[Apostle of Autumn]**.

It felt like all three of them were a threat to her, especially the woman in the middle. She wore an elegant black dress so long, it trailed behind her, with blue details studded here and there. She had long white hair that was tied back with a bejeweled pin, and sported odd tear streaks on her cheeks that made Emily's mind shudder.

The most striking were her eyes. Two orbs that both commanded attention and forced her to look away. The blue streak that formed a thin pupil held a terrifying power that threatened to suffocate Emily's very soul.

It looked like she was a mourner heading to a funeral, and her companions looked just as odd. To her left walked a woman who wasn't as striking, and was clearly blind, with two hollow sockets where her eyes should be. However, inside the gaping holes, two small turquoise storms raged, giving the Revenant a manic appearance.

An odd fleshy eye hovered over her shoulder, making Emily glance at Abby with hesitation. A distant cousin, perhaps? More likely a conjured ability like her own lizard, there to provide the blind Revenant with the ability of sight.

The craziest part was, Emily recognized this person. It was Leviala, the traitor of the Mystic Realm who'd almost gotten them all killed. Emily started to get a sinking feeling as she put two and two together, and her eyes turned to the third person who towered over the other two. He exuded an oppressive darkness, and he wore a large hood that covered most of his features.

However, a white snout stuck out of the shadows of the cowl. Emily didn't recognize the beastman, but someone else certainly did.

"You! Cervantes!" Hekruv Vira shouted with shock as the appearance of the largest newcomer was exposed.

Helo's reaction was even greater, with dozens of gems across his body erupting with almost blinding radiance as his aura veritably exploded. A massive hammer made from dark-blue steel appeared in his hands, and the whole chamber was suffused in an aura of immense weight. Emily may as well

have been transported to the depths of an ocean, with billions of tons of water weighing down on her shoulders.

“It would appear you gentlemen knew my predecessor,” the huge werewolf said, removing his cowl before he bowed at the other two beastkin. “However, while I share a body with Cervantes, I am not he. My name is Rhuger Blackwood, captain of the Einherjar.”

“Pika Blackwood, captain,” the second Revenant said, leaving only the mysterious woman in the middle.

“Leviala...” Hekruv Vira sighed as he glanced at Joanna, who clearly wasn’t surprised to see these new arrivals. “So, this was your fate.”

“What the hell is going on!” Emily cut in as she glared back and forth between Joanna and the undead. “What has Zac done?”

“I think you already understand.” Joanna shrugged. “This was one of Lord Atwood’s plans to protect Earth and make use of the unique nature of our planet.”

“That rascal,” Sap Trang muttered before he took a deep drag from a pipe and sat down.

“He really raised a bunch of Zombies instead of expanding the Academy? Don’t we have enough trouble on our hands already?” Emily said with a stomp before she glanced at the Revenants. “No offense.”

“None taken,” the woman in the middle smiled. “I am Vilari, leader of the Einherjar. If it’s any consolation, we have no connection to the Undead Empire. Zachary Atwood is our progenitor.”

“The Einherjar are like the Valkyries.” Joanna nodded. “They are only loyal to Lord Atwood.”

“We have a secret Revenant army? As general of the forces, I’m a bit hurt I wasn’t made aware,” Ilvere snorted as he looked the Revenants up and down. “Well, no matter. Our force is so diverse already, what’s a few of the unliving? Why has this meeting been called? If hidden cards like these...

Einherjar... are being brought to light, it cannot be a small matter.”

“The truth would be exposed sooner or later, but we originally planned on keeping it a secret at least until Lord Atwood returned,” Joanna said. “But something has changed, which is why we called this meeting. Please, everyone. Come sit down.”

“We fought those Zombies for years, and that guy just goes and creates new ones,” Emily muttered, taking a seat at the table, and getting an emphatic nod of agreement from Sap Trang.

“Port Atwood has received a quest, and as Lord Atwood is busy searching for opportunities, it has been handed over to me,” Abby said. “This world has been presented with an opportunity, most likely thanks to the young master’s impressive performance. An opportunity to sharpen our elites. We have been awarded an incursion.”

Exclamations erupted, with people’s expressions ranging from excitement to disgust. Emily felt a chaotic jumble of emotions running through her head. She knew Zac was getting farther and farther away from them, to the point he might eventually discard Port Atwood altogether in search of greater heights. An incursion meant another round of Origin Dao, quests, titles, and unique treasures.

A way for herself and Port Atwood to keep pace.

But she remembered all too well the kind of terror and suffering the integration had forced upon an unsuspecting world. The sense of helplessness of her siblings disappearing into thin air, desperately struggling against an increasingly hostile environment. Of being exposed to the ugliness of mankind when society collapsed. Could she really bring herself to deliver such suffering on others?

“Is this normal?” Hekruv Vira asked with a frown. “Our records about newly integrated worlds are limited, but I haven’t heard of such an opportunity being dispensed by the Heavens to such a fresh world. From what I understood, the first century is meant to slowly adapt and nurture the first

generation of proper cultivators, at which point the assimilation will take place.”

“This is not the standard procedure, but it is not unheard of. Zachary Atwood has accomplished many mindboggling feats... Yet his force...” Abby sighed. “You are too weak.”

“Too weak? Too weak for what?” Emily frowned.

“To survive what’s to come,” Joanna said.

“And what is that?” Ilvere asked.

“War,” Vilari said. “War is coming. Our master released the madness of war in the Tower of Eternity, and now conflict has come knocking at our door. Lord Atwood is inexorably linked to this struggle. As we are now, we will not be able to assist Lord Atwood, let alone be able to protect our world. We will be swept away by the currents, fodder for our enemies.”

Fear gripped Emily’s heart, and she remembered the warning in Zac’s letter. He told her about this, saying that war was coming to the Zecia Sector. However, it was one thing to hear about some diffuse and distant conflict, and another to be presented with a draft notice.

“The Einherjar and Valkyries will enter the incursion in full force,” Joanna added. “The world we’re invading is not like Earth. It already has cultivators, and the limit of expedition members is level 100. We expect the opposition to be harsh, far more so than the scattered resistance Earth put up. It is the only way for us to keep moving forward for the foreseeable future. Opportunities on our planet have grown scarce.”

“What about the demonkin?” Ilvere asked.

“Anyone with Port Atwood as alignment can enter,” Abby answered. “Which excludes some of you.”

Ilvere grimaced, but acknowledged the point. The demon glanced at Janos, who imperceptibly nodded in agreement.

“If you’ll have us, we are willing to take that step. We have been through it once already, and while we got steamrolled,

we still possess some unique understanding that might prove useful,” Ilvere said, and Joanna nodded in agreement.

“I... cannot,” Sap Trang sighed with a shake of his head. “This old man cannot in good conscience take that step... I will stay and guard our home in your stead. Don’t worry, nothing will happen with me and Little Bau patrolling the waters.”

“I... I...” Emily stammered, frozen with indecision.

Her thoughts were a jumble, and she couldn’t decide what to do. Suddenly, a calming wave soothed her mind, and she looked over as the mysterious Revenant walked over.

“Child, no need to fret,” she said as she produced a token and a letter. “Our master has prepared another path for you. It will be dangerous, but it is an opportunity to broaden your horizons and become stronger.”

Zac opened his abyssal eyes as the storm in his soul aperture subsided. A smile spread across his face, as he had taken yet another step forward in his cultivation. It had taken eight months of arduous work, but he finally managed to infuse six revolutions of his Life-Death Array with his Dao.

The extra layer resulted in a soul storm of unprecedented ferocity, but the gains were also demonstrably greater compared to using just five infusions. The storm generated almost 15% more motes that turned into fertilizer for the core of his soul, which was now almost four times as large compared to when he’d started to cultivate his soul in earnest.

In fact, the core of his soul wasn’t the only thing that changed over the past eight months. The oceans themselves kept some of the infused meaning from each revolution, and they teemed with energy. In fact, if Zac focused, he could sometimes see vague scripts forming in the waters, markings containing the truths of Life and Death.

They only lasted for an instant, but it was a testament to how much meaning Zac managed to impart into the oceans. Of course, most of it was thanks to absorbing all that Twilight Energy and setting up an extremely sturdy foundation to cultivate upon. If he had cultivated in his own cave back on Earth, it would probably have taken a decade or two to reach this point.

Even his soul aperture itself had been considerably strengthened by the constant clashes between life and death, and Zac suspected his natural resistance to soul attacks had become a lot stronger compared to before. All in all, he was in a far better state to deal with the upcoming challenges. Zac was about to continue his cultivation session by focusing on expelling some of the toxins in his body, but he froze as he suddenly sensed something.

A presence.

It was weak like a candle in the wind, but it had appeared out of nowhere, right in his temporary cultivation cave. Zac sprang into motion as the coffin took its place on his back while a spare axe appeared in his hand. He'd been discovered, and no matter who managed to find this place, it couldn't possibly be good news.

“Well, you're a weird one. A Draugr cultivating Life touched by the Buddhist Sangha. No wonder you managed to travel this deep into the chasm.” A booming laugh echoed through Zac's cave.

UNINVITED GUEST

Zac looked back and forth for the source of the voice, but no matter what method he used, he couldn't pinpoint it. The voice belonged to a man Zac couldn't place at all. The stranger's ability to analyze his situation so easily was extremely disconcerting, but Zac had been smart to activate the array hiding his Duplicity Core the second he sensed something amiss.

His mind went through all kinds of possibilities. Was it perhaps Ykrodas who finally managed to track him down? Zac wouldn't be surprised if the Havarok princeling had set his sights on him, considering Ykrodas still hadn't managed to pass him on the ladder to this day.

But his instincts told him it was someone else. Though Ykrodas belonged to a proper B-grade force that no doubt possessed all kinds of methods, it felt extremely unlikely another E-grade cultivator would be able to track him down to this extremely secluded spot. And even if they knew where he was, could they even reach him? He was in the middle of a Twilight Crystal mine, and they'd explode from the energy density before getting close.

There was someone else who might possess that ability though. Someone far more dangerous than some E-grade scion.

"It wasn't easy to track you down," the voice continued. "I guess it is time to discuss reparations."

It was him.

There was no hesitation, and Zac immediately took out his most powerful escape talisman and infused it with Miasma. However, it just turned to dust as the surrounding cave shuddered. The talisman had completely failed, and worry turned to fear upon realizing that the energy in the area had turned turbid and lifeless. He was already infusing energy into **[Abyssal Phase]**, but nothing happened.

Without that skill, Zac couldn't even leave the room. He was stuck.

"Who's there!" Zac shouted, though he already knew the answer.

"You know," the man continued as though he hadn't noticed anything. "If you had been smart, you wouldn't have answered me when I spoke to you earlier. That way, I might not have actually found you."

"What?" Zac blurted with wide eyes, which prompted the man to boisterously laugh again.

"I'm just kidding. The Twilight Chasm is my domain. It's not so easy to elude me. To answer your question, I've gone by many identities. My current one is the Twilight Lord," the voice answered. "It's quite impressive. Millennia of preparations thwarted by a Draugr not yet of age. You have no idea the cost of your actions."

"I think there has been a misunderstanding," Zac said as he grasped for a way out of the situation. "I have no interest in working against you or Twilight Harbor. I am just looking for opportunities as I pass through this sector."

Should he try to fight his way out? Zac discarded the idea as soon as it appeared. The walls around him were hundreds of meters thick, and he didn't even have a target to attack. Besides, he'd already been discovered once in a forgotten corner of the Mystic Realm, proving that the Twilight Lord had far greater control over this place than Zac previously thought possible.

Not only was the Twilight Lord able to nurture that monstrous snake that surpassed the limit of what should be

permissible in this trial, he was even able to send his consciousness into the Twilight Chasm. This went against everything he knew about Mystic Realms controlled by the System, and there was only one possibility that he could come up with.

The Twilight Lord was inside the Twilight Ocean.

Nala had already said the Twilight Lord hadn't been seen for tens of thousands of years, and the last C-grade trial took place twenty thousand years ago. Had he somehow found a way to stay inside the Mystic Realm after it closed at that point? For what purpose? And more importantly, just how far did the Twilight Lord's grasp extend?

Even if he was actually here, there was no way the System would let him run amok in a sanctioned E-grade trial. And the Twilight Lord should definitely know what transpired eight months ago, which hopefully meant he would tread more carefully going forward. After all, only a fool would risk drawing the ire of the Heavens after already having been given a warning.

That was his way to survive this encounter, so he slowly relaxed and stowed away his axe.

"Misunderstanding? Just passing through?" The Twilight Lord snorted. "Sometimes you can get swept up in grand events even without intending so, a victim of the torrents of fate. I know that feeling all too well."

Zac sensed a small surge of energy, and he swirled around as an illusory shape took form at the edge of the cave. The man appeared human, except his skin had an odd greenish-golden hue. He was almost completely covered in scars, and he had both the aura and disposition of a warrior of a thousand battles. He exuded an air of confidence and drive, his eyes seemingly piercing straight through Zac's soul.

The appearance of the Twilight Lord's avatar was startling, and Zac was even more shocked that he actually recognized the man. And it wasn't that he'd seen images of the Twilight Lord since arriving to the harbor, but rather from a missive he bought back in the Zecia Sector. The man in front of him was

a bit older, and his skin tone was completely different, but the main features were the same.

It was the Eveningtide Asura.

The true appearance of the man behind the cataclysmic events back in the Zecia Sector wasn't widely circulated. In fact, none of the information houses in Zecia dared carry much information about him out of fear he'd one day return. The intelligence read more like tales of heroics and bravery rather than proper information missives, and any factual information such as appearance, class, skills, and strength were notably missing.

Zac had been extremely curious about the Eveningtide Asura, since he was almost considered the second coming of him, and their backgrounds were fairly similar. The fact that no one dared to sell intelligence on him through the Mercantile System didn't stop Zac with his nigh-unlimited access to every corner of the sector.

One of his followers had managed to procure a proper missive from a declining information house that had lost its Mercantile License. The way it described the events 980,000 years ago was completely different from public knowledge.

Rather than a heroic lone wolf, the Eveningtide Asura had been described as a ruthless opportunist who skirted the edge of unorthodoxy without ever completely leaving the embrace of the System. He never cared about right and wrong in his pursuit of power, and his hands were already drenched in blood long before the more well-known events. Where he slaughtered dozens of Peak clans upon his return.

Both Zac and this man had come up in the same way, being progenitors of planets integrated into the Zecia Sector. However, while Zac had somewhat stumbled onto the path of supremacy, Alvod Jondir had firmly embarked on it through murder. Every threat to his supremacy on his home planet, foreign or native, had been butchered, after which he essentially turned his planet into a furnace for his own cultivation.

By the time his world had been assimilated, only a broken F-grade planet remained, with Alvod having extracted the essence of the World Core itself. It was this very ability to absorb the power of the planets themselves that had eventually sparked a manhunt, because not only was it an extremely powerful method to cultivate, it was a huge threat to most clans.

What if the Eveningtide Asura appeared on their planet one day, slowly siphoning off the power of the World Core?

So while the man standing in front of Zac appeared like a straightforward warrior with the aura of a hero, he knew it was just an image hiding a ruthless cultivator who made the Great Redeemer seem as harmless as a baby chick. A cultivator who was famous for being extremely thorough in his acts of revenge.

Zac felt beads of sweat rolling down his back, but he controlled his aura and facial expression to not give away the fact that he knew the true identity of the man in front of him. Meanwhile, his thoughts were a confused jumble, as he simply couldn't understand what was going on. Most people thought the Eveningtide Asura was long dead for hundreds of thousands of years after having angered some powerful force. Yet here he stood, seemingly doing just fine.

Was the Eveningtide Asura actually the Twilight Lord or was he simply pretending? When had the change taken place? Because one thing was for certain; the current Twilight Lord had reigned for over six hundred thousand years, which made it impossible that Alvod had been him from the start.

“Lord Twilight, it’s an honor,” Zac said with a bow, working hard to keep his face impassive. “I apologize if my actions inadvertently caused any problems to the trial. My masters will provide recompense for any damage.”

“I am quite certain there is no clan called ‘Black.’ They have better taste than that. Who are you? Who are your masters, and what interests do they have in this trial?” the man asked.

Zac hesitated before he made a decision. He'd never managed to trick anyone when lying through his teeth, and he wasn't so arrogant as to think he could suddenly outsmart an old monster who's lived over a million years. He would need to expose some of his secrets, while leaving some things vague.

"None whatsoever," Zac said, and displayed his Fragment of the Coffin, complementing the earlier display of the Fragment of the Bodhi. "They are both Autarchs with no interest in this place of Twilight Harbor. One of them is walking the path of Oblivion, the other the path of Creation. I was sent here to temper myself and—"

"Life is not Life... Death is not Death... Oblivion and Creation," Alvod mused, his eyes gleaming. "You are here for the two shards that were absorbed a few eons ago."

"I'm supposed to fetch them for my masters. But if they are part of Lord Twilight's plans, I will stand down," Zac said.

Alvod studied Zac in silence for a full minute, though it might as well have been a year as far as Zac was concerned.

"You are really an interesting one, and our paths are surprisingly similar. It's almost a shame our conclusions diverged, leading us toward different peaks." The Eveningtide Asura sighed. "The path you're on... is without return."

Zac was extremely interested in finding out what he meant, but he didn't dare interrupt him, since it actually seemed like he was changing his mind about something. Seeing as he probably came with vengeance in tow, that could only be good news.

"You caused me a great deal of trouble, but perhaps this can become an opportunity to wipe the slate of Karma clean. Those two items are like tumors in this realm, causing a constant disturbance in the composition of Twilight," Alvod said. "They are empowered by the Twilight Energy as well and have formed powerful natural formations around them."

Zac frowned when he heard about them being powered by the Twilight Energy, as this was outside his expectations. Then

again, he couldn't be too surprised since they were still here even though they were placed in the middle of the Mystic Realm. If they were easy to get, they would have been snatched up long ago by some greedy trial-taker.

"I have come prepared," Zac lied. "And if there's anything else I can do to help out—"

"Kind of you to offer, brat." The Eveningtide Asura laughed as a large vat of liquor appeared in his hand. "Actually, there is something you can do for me. As acting Earl of Twilight Harbor, I require assistance. Receive my decree."

'I just said that to be polite!' Zac screamed in his mind, but he still nodded quickly in agreement. However, his eyes widened upon realizing his mistake. A piece of information he'd almost forgotten emerged from the back of his head, and his fears were soon confirmed as a screen appeared in front of him.

Cleansing Waters (Decree): Follow the tracker and unblock the turbid energy. Reward: Reward based on performance after the end of the Twilight Ascent. (0/729).

Zac barely had time to read the quest prompt before a small vortex opened up. It looked harmless enough, but Zac didn't dare step forward until it had dropped off a small box and disappeared.

"Careful enough," the projection snorted as it took a swig. "Well, the foolhardy die sooner or later. Do not worry. If I wanted you dead, you would already have entered the cycle of reincarnation. This is just a simple tracking array to lead the way."

"Lead the way to what?" Zac asked with a frown, having no idea what the quest actually wanted him to do.

"People currently participating in the trial are acting against Twilight Harbor. Their backgrounds are too powerful,

so I could only let them enter and try to minimize the damage they caused. Unfortunately, they have proven surprisingly resourceful, forcing me to intervene.” Alvod sighed. “They have managed to undo a lot of good work that has been done to make this ocean flourish, messing with the energy flow of this realm.”

Zac’s bullshit radar was reading off the charts, but there was no way he’d expose the Eveningtide Asura’s lies. This man wasn’t doing anything out of the goodness of his heart, and it was probably just a matter of fighting for resources between Monarchs. Ultimately, it didn’t matter. He just needed to survive this ordeal now that he’d been roped in.

He had offered to help and agreed to provide assistance. That was his mistake. It might have been an empty gesture, but it allowed Alvod to generate a quest. Most cultivators weren’t able to do so, but the Twilight Lord was clearly a Middle-tier noble holding the rank of Earl.

Someone like Zac who controlled a single planet was just a lord, but he suspected a future quest reward would elevate him to a Baron, the next level of the System-run hierarchy. Higher status didn’t increase his combat strength, but it allowed someone to make more use of the System’s features.

This wasn’t a feature added by the Apostates, but rather something related to the original function of the System. It was a training apparatus for the war of the Limitless Empire, and the leaders of the empire were supposed to be able to tap into the System to some degree.

One such ability was to generate quests like Alvod had done right now.

The problem wasn’t the quest itself, but rather the danger it represented. Zac didn’t have any concrete proof, but there were indications that a connection like this was almost like a Karmic bond. For example, Abby instinctively knew all kinds of things that happened all over Port Atwood thanks to her being connected to the System.

What if the Eveningtide Asura could use this quest to keep track of him?

Zac didn't let his misgivings show on the surface though, and reluctantly picked up the array that had appeared.

“Oh, not happy?” Alvod snorted, clearly sensing Zac's hesitation.

“It's just that I already have a target on my back...” Zac sighed.

“Well, how about this?” The man grinned as a token appeared in his hand. “As long as you destroy over half the jammers, you can exchange this for an item from my treasury outside. You should know my reputation already. I will not shortchange someone from the junior generation. Not that I can with a sanctioned quest in progress.”

Zac hadn't seen the token before, but there was one word written on its surface in the script of the Multiverse—Vast. It didn't take long to put two and two together, and his heartbeat sped up. A Perennial Vastness Token.

As for the reputation, Alvod obviously meant his reputation as the Twilight Lord, a man known for taking in a lot of talented wandering cultivators and nurturing them. He did honestly have a pretty good track record in that regard, but that didn't provide much comfort for Zac, who knew the man's true identity.

“I'll do my best,” Zac said. “However, that item is already claimed by the Fate-Plucking Ladder.”

“It's my treasury, so I do what I want with it,” Alvod guffawed as the token disappeared. “Those on the outside are growing a bit uppity since I've been in seclusion for too long, giving my treasures out left and right. But I'll show them wha —”

The Twilight Lord stopped mid-sentence as another presence descended upon the cave. This one was all too familiar as well, carrying a sense of indifference in its boundless power.

“I guess it's time to go,” Alvod muttered. “Complete your task, and we'll wipe the slate clean. One month. I want to see

results within one month. Otherwise, I might be led to believe you are actually working against me.”

He was gone the next second, and the pressure of the System disappeared a moment later. It was clearly just interested in booting the interloper from the trial rather than conversing with Zac this time around. It left Zac alone in the cave, though it didn't feel nearly as safe and secluded.

“Well, shit.”

THE LAST LAUGH

The cultivation cave where he'd spent the better part of a year was no longer a secure sanctuary, but more like a home that had been burglarized.

Zac knew he was mostly to blame for getting wrapped up in this mess. Staying in one place for this long was to tempt fate, but the location was simply too good to give up on. He'd been making rapid progress, both in levels and in regard to his soul. Over the past three months, he had repeatedly considered finally setting out, only to feel the need to keep cultivating a little bit longer.

Now he'd been exposed, and the Quest Screen loomed over his head like an executioner's axe.

Thankfully, it didn't look like the Eveningtide Asura managed to get the whole picture. Zac couldn't be certain, but Alvod's control of the Mystic Realm probably wasn't as great as he tried to let on. Why wait eight months if "the Twilight Chasm was his domain"? It was either prohibitively difficult to manifest inside this place as he had or his senses were blocked out by the System, making discovering Zac difficult.

It was also clear the System didn't allow the Twilight Lord to directly alter events, as it had descended after just a minute, even though the Eveningtide Asura only appeared as a weak presence. Unfortunately, it was impossible to tell exactly what Alvod managed to glean in their short encounter. For example, had he activated the array in time? Would Alvod be able to discover anything as a weak consciousness?

One thing was for sure, Zac didn't dare swap between his races in this place any longer. The intruding presence had been booted by the System, but who knew what methods a Monarch possessed. Also, the final threat of the Eveningtide Asura made him afraid to delay.

It was a shame too, as he'd managed to reach level 120 two weeks ago. If he pushed himself, he might have been able to gain another five before the trial ended. Truthfully, he'd hoped to reach level 125 after a year, but progress was rapidly slowing down. He still had more than enough Beast Cores and **[Chainbreaking Pills]** to keep going, but the problem was his hidden node.

[Void Heart] could only purify so much energy per minute, whereas the amount of energy required for each node increased exponentially. For the first two levels, his wounds had been the bottleneck, with the next node being ready to be opened the moment he recovered. But from level 118, that had changed to an issue of energy supply.

Reaching level 120 had taken three weeks longer than the previous level, and Zac guessed he'd require another two months for the next. It was just like when he got his hands on Nexus Crystals in the beginning. He'd gained a few levels smoothly in the earlier stages of the F-grade, and soon enough, the energy the crystals provided was all but negligible.

He'd tried feeding the hidden node all kinds of things, from natural treasure to straight-up going back to absorbing Twilight Energy. Having **[Void Heart]** feast on natural treasures was no doubt the quickest, as it processed and returned that energy far quicker than anything else. Conversely, using Twilight Energy didn't only take three times as long to refine, but it also left behind a bunch of unwanted energies.

Seeing as he only had so many natural treasures, he'd soon enough reverted to only using Beast Cores while keeping the Twilight Energy away by crushing Supreme-quality crystals. It was a disappointment, but pushing five levels in eight months as a mortal was a tremendous achievement. Doing the same had taken Galvarion well over a decade, and it might even

have matched Catheya's leveling speed during her time in the Temporal Chamber.

To reach level 125, Zac might need two to three full years cultivating this way. Of course, he could drastically shorten that time through slaughter, but Zac knew that ship had sailed. He didn't dare burst any more nodes now that he was leaving the chasm. He needed his full combat strength going forward.

Getting a new set of skills was impossible, but there was one more thing he could do. Eight months of refining his soul wasn't enough to reach the second reincarnation, but it had still strengthened his soul tremendously. With some help, it should be just enough.

Zac spent the next five hours refilling his mental energy and stabilizing his mind, at which point he took out one of his **[Fractal Framework Arrays]** meant for his undead side. Having spent this long in one place had given Zac ample time to train his proficiency in upgrading skills, with all his ancillary skills being evolved by now except for **[Beauty Yrial's Great Transformation Skill]**.

Even **[Cosmic Gaze]** had been upgraded to E-grade on his Draugr form, though he still hadn't managed to improve **[Piercing Gaze]** in his human form to match.

There were, however, two final holdouts on his Draugr side, and leaving before improving the situation might prove lethal. **[Vanguard of Undeath]** still worked decently enough, but **[Profane Seal]** simply wasn't durable enough to deal with the elites of the trial. He had seen how effortlessly Uona had broken through his cage, and there were more examples, like Yanub Mettleleaf and the ice mage in the Greengrove Archipelago.

He was about to set out with a massive bounty on his head, and he needed the ability to trap others, making sure his location wasn't exposed. He needed to upgrade **[Profane Seal]** even if there was a risk of it being downgraded to a lower-quality skill. However, Zac wasn't without some confidence.

He placed the **[Fractal Framework Array]** next to the oversized **[Mind's Eye Agate]** to make sure he could get the

most out of the treasure, but Zac wasn't done there. A small jade box appeared on the ground in front of him, followed by a crystalline vial with a shimmering pill inside.

It was the **[Dawn Awakening]** pill, whereas the box contained one of the two dumpling fruits. He still didn't know what the item was called or its exact usage, but he managed to form an educated opinion three months ago. Having been a bit bored and restless, and overcome with curiosity, he'd cut off a small bite from the smaller of the two natural treasures.

It was just a corner of the plant, but the energy provided some clues of the treasure's true nature. It wasn't a Dao Treasure, at least not as far as he could tell, but it was still something extremely useful.

Zac swallowed the **[Dawn Awakening]** pill, and a wave of power swept through his body, transforming it into something else. Suddenly, it felt like he'd become a part of the Twilight Ocean, perhaps even an integral part to its infinitely intricate tapestry. He was one with the ocean, and the ocean was one with him.

The feeling was so palpable, he actually stopped himself from crushing another Miasma Crystal when his surroundings were impacted, and the Twilight Energy that swirled around him was no longer hostile to his presence. It didn't try to force its way into his body until he exploded, instead simply sticking to him like a pet clinging to its owner.

The change was intoxicating, but Zac had bigger fish to fry than to enjoy the absence of the pervasive and crushing pressure of the Twilight Energy. He opened the lid of the jade box, and he stuffed the unblemished dumpling into his mouth, swallowing bit by bit until he'd consumed the whole thing, stem and all.

The natural treasure looked like a white ball of rice dough and contained a juicy dark-green pulp that tasted a bit like a mix of kiwi and divinity. He'd never eaten something so delicious, though he wasn't sure if it was another side effect of **[Dawn Awakening]**. The pulp juices were full of the mysterious energy that tricked him into thinking it was a Dao

Treasure, and it perfectly blended with every single inch of his body.

Most of all, Zac was filled with an unprecedented sense of clarity, where the scripts and patterns that were the source for many a headache were suddenly as clear as day. It felt like his IQ was rising exponentially by the second, and he was awash with ideas to not only improve his current skills, but even create new ones.

This was the true nature of the mysterious fruit he'd found: inspiration.

It was a treasure that provided an unprecedented state of clarity into matters related to Life and Death. No matter if it was creating skills or upgrading existing ones, it could take your concepts to a whole new level. No doubt it would be an amazing treasure for craftsmen as well. Anyone who created an item under the influence of this fruit would produce a Spiritual Tool or pill of unprecedented quality.

Zac wasted no time, and the extremely complex skill fractal of [**Profane Seal**] soon emerged from his body and entered the array. He'd thought about this step for months on end, running hundreds and hundreds of simulations, analyzing every single step of the process over and over to make sure to avoid as many of the pitfalls as possible.

There were so many patterns working together in perfect harmony to create the extremely impressive cage that had become the staple of his undead side, and the slightest mistake could cause the whole structure to unravel. However, as Zac looked at the projection of the skill fractal, he wasn't content. He saw it as a piece of art, as a burgeoning life holding vast amounts of untapped potential for greatness. If he followed his original plan, he would succeed, and he would create a top-tier E-grade skill.

But he could do better.

There was a small voice in the back of his head that urged caution, but Zac pushed those thoughts befitting smaller-minded men aside. He was consumed by the glory of creation, and like a master artisan, he set about his work with both

conviction and precision. Whole sections of the skill fractal were transformed, taking in and adding various concepts.

Runes that had never appeared on any of his skills before were added, based only on pictures and descriptions he'd seen in information crystals. He dug deep for all kinds of sources of inspiration. Some came from obvious sources, like his other skills and his Dao Visions. Others were things he normally wouldn't even consider, such as the river of death that swirled around Be'Zi and the ominous tower that probably held one of the Splinters of Oblivion.

The array was beeping ominously after just a few minutes, but Zac was undeterred. He was one with the skill fractal, and he could feel the limits it could tolerate like it was part of his own body. And he would need to push that limit over and over to reach the goal he was still conceptualizing as he moved along.

Zac strayed further and further away from his envisioned path, grasping higher and higher. He felt how his soul was being rapidly drained, which was no surprise considering the number of adjustments and calculations he was doing on the fly. But he didn't care. Perfection couldn't be constrained by budget concerns, and he just crushed a couple of Soul Crystals as he kept going.

Eventually, the skill fractal was an unrecognizable clump of discordant concepts, a mess made up of thousands of barely interlocking parts. If nothing drastic changed before he ran out of mental energy, the skill would be completely ruined. The seeds of doubt grew increasingly loud, but there was no turning back now.

He could only trust his instincts, doubling down on the madness as he pushed on with his plan. Soon enough, his vision started to blur. What once was clear was gradually becoming convoluted. The skill fractal no longer looked like the seed of perfection, but more of a testament to man's folly.

However, Zac knew that was just a mirage, and desperately squeezed out the last of the medicinal effect of the

natural treasure as his mind provided the final motes of mental energy he had left. He was almost there.

The final rune was the only component missing, and as it was added, tens of thousands of runes suddenly snapped into place. There truly was greatness hidden in chaos, but Zac had no time to celebrate. He hurriedly extracted the skill fractal as he felt his consciousness slip, and he barely had time to reattach it to his pathways before he passed out, his mind utterly overdrawn.

Zac woke up with a splitting headache, but it was nothing compared to the pain of his body almost exploding from energy overload. He hurriedly activated **[Void Zone]** to stop any more energy from entering his body, after which he started to refine the energy that filled every inch of his body.

Soon enough, a massive cloud of expelled energy had formed above his head. This time he had only been out of it for twenty hours, which was a relief considering he didn't have the void beast organ to perpetually power **[Void Zone]** this time around. Ten minutes later, the situation wasn't quite as deadly, allowing him to breathe out and check his Status Screen.

Name: Zachary Atwood

Level: 120

Class: [E-Epic] Fetters of Desolation

Race: [D] Draugr – Void Emperor (Corrupted)

Alignment: [Earth] Port Atwood – Planetary Lord

Titles: [...] Frontrunner, Apex Progenitor, Pathstrider, Runebinder, Runic Erudition

Limited Titles: Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star – 14th, Weight of Sin, Equanimity, Heart of Fire, Big Axe Gladiator

Dao: Fragment of the Axe – Peak, Fragment of the Coffin – Peak, Fragment of the Bodhi – Peak

Core: [E] Duplicity

Strength: 8,889 [Increase: 110%. Efficiency: 250%]

Dexterity: 3,910 [Increase: 80%. Efficiency: 187%]

Endurance: 7,383 [Increase: 101%. Efficiency: 250%]

Vitality: 6,311 [Increase: 89%. Efficiency: 238%]

Intelligence: 1,656 [Increase: 74%. Efficiency: 187%]

Wisdom: 3,443 [Increase: 81%. Efficiency: 197%]

Luck: 466 [Increase: 96%. Efficiency: 197%]

Free Points: 0

Nexus Coins: [D] 938,715

His attributes had taken a surprising leap since he'd allocated his free points into Dexterity and Wisdom a few weeks back, and it wasn't hard to find the source.

[Runic Erudition: Form a path-bound Supreme-quality skill while still in E-grade. Reward: All stats +5%. Effect of Strength, Endurance, Wisdom +5%]

Zac looked at the title with marvel, both exalted by the boost it provided and what it represented. A Supreme-quality skill? Zac didn't even know such a thing existed, but it was all he needed to see to know that his gambit succeeded.

This was exactly what he needed. He was tired of being taken advantage of, tired of being used as a disposable chess piece in the machinations of the old monsters lurking outside the trial. He needed more strength, and this was a step in the right direction. It wouldn't make a difference against terrifying beings like the Eveningtide Asura, but even an ant could create some waves that would have unexpected consequences.

He was tired of being used and discarded by these old Monarchs who would barely spare him a glance. He felt his very soul buckle and rage at the restraints that kept being placed on him. It was time to strike back. Directly confronting someone like the Eveningtide Asura was obviously out of the question, but a plan was already forming in Zac's mind, a way to get what he wanted while also throwing a wrench in his and Uona's plans.

They would see who would have the last laugh.

Alvod took a deep breath as the memories of his soul sliver returned to his mind, and a sneer soon covered his face. Arcaz Black, that little brat was nowhere near as cowed as he wanted to let on. These youngsters all thought themselves so clever, that they were unique and infallible. He would soon learn the harshness of the Multiverse, as so many had before him.

But there was still a lingering sense of unease in Alvod's heart as he went over the words of the young Draugr. Was he really related to two unknown Autarchs walking the Boundless Path? It sounded ludicrous. Though not even Alvod would be able to instill a Draugr with affinity to life.

Someone had devised a Heaven-defying method, and it was possible that it truly was someone the brat knew rather than a fortuitous encounter. Not only that, the brat had clearly recognized his true identity. Arcaz Black was more involved in the events Alvod had set in motion than he tried to let on.

Alvod eventually calmed down. The convergence of fate in Twilight Harbor was too great. It was expected that some unexpected parties would make an appearance. If the Draugr was speaking the truth, he most likely was a vessel the two masters were nurturing, an experiment to travel that broken peak. That wouldn't interfere with Alvod's plans, and it might in fact help him.

Conversely, if the little bastard lied, then Alvod had contingencies for that as well. Thousands of people had thought they could pull one over on him over the eons, yet they had all turned into fertilizer for his Dao. He had planned this for so long, and no matter if it was the Havarok, the imperials, or this Draugr, he would handle them all.

They would see who would have the last laugh.

ASCENT

[E] Pillar of Desolation – Proficiency: Early. Stuck and struggling. Inexorable desolation. Upgradeable.

Zac was endlessly relieved he hadn't listened to the whispers of doubt in the back of his mind that told him to give up on his drug-induced ambition and instead try to salvage the skill. Its description didn't seem any different compared to any of his other skills, but it was most likely the most powerful one in his repertoire at the moment.

His best guess was that it was the kind of skill you'd get from an Arcane class, which should add another layer of raw power output. As for the skill being "path-bound," it probably meant the skill was tailor-made for his path, having completely broken free from the ill-fitting archetype of his previous Undying Bulwark class.

Zac gave it a thought as he took out the second dumpling, but sighed with regret when he opened the lid of the jade box where he stored it. A gust of dense herbal aroma wafted into his face, but his body was mostly indifferent to the presence of the treasure. Just as he expected, this dumpling was the sort of item you could only enjoy once. He wouldn't be able to use the second one for evolving **[Vanguard of Undeath]** or **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**.

Still, **[Profane Seal]** was the lynchpin of his Draugr class, and now that it was upgraded and improved, he felt a lot more confident even if he encountered the true elites of the trial. Even still being some distance away from defeating them, he was a lot more confident in escaping with his life intact. After

all, while the details had become blurry in the wake of his epiphany, Zac was still certain that **[Pillar of Desolation]** remained a restraining skill even after the evolution.

He briefly considered upgrading **[Vanguard of Undeath]** even without the liquid clarity of the natural treasure, but he was drained after eating the dumpling, like he had used a year's worth of inspiration in creating **[Pillar of Desolation]**. Any skill he created in his current state was bound to be unimpressive, if he managed to complete the upgrade at all.

Besides, while the dumpling might not be serviceable for another round, there were all kinds of opportunities out there. Both his classes were doing just fine without upgrading their final skills, and he would get another set of skills upon reaching level 125. Now that Zac knew attaining these kinds of unique skills was possible, he might as well keep **[Vanguard of Undeath]** and **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** unevolved until he found some way to enter another bout of inspiration.

With that, it was time to get going. Of course, that didn't mean he would leave a small fortune behind, and Zac turned into a whirlwind of unfettered greed as he ripped out one crystal after another from the walls. The shimmering light in the chamber grew dimmer and dimmer until even the broken crystals had been stowed away.

That left only two crystals inside the cave, the massive **[Mind's Eye Agate]** and the sanguine stone where **[Verun's Bite]** was still sealed.

Verun had finished its evolution months ago, but it had indicated to Zac that it wanted to stay inside the crystal. The aura of the **[Mind's Eye Agate]** apparently helped Verun strengthen its spirituality, though the effect was obviously not as pronounced as Zac's when using a soul-strengthening method.

Still, the stronger the Tool Spirit, the easier the evolution to D-grade would become for Verun, so Zac had let it cultivate in peace while he focused on his own cultivation. But all good things had to come to an end.

“It’s time to go, buddy.” Zac smiled as he put his palm against the smooth surface of the crystal.

There was no immediate response, but a roar echoed through the cave as cracks started to spread across the surface of the crystal. It split open, and Zac snatched up the axe before it fell on the ground. However, doing so almost made him topple over, and he looked at the weapon with a mix of surprise and satisfaction.

Since having finished its evolution, its weight had increased almost ten times over, and it felt far sturdier compared to before. That wasn’t a problem for Zac, even if he hadn’t expected it when grabbing it. If anything, it made the weapon easier to wield now that its weight better matched his massive increase in Strength.

That wasn’t the only thing to change, and Zac’s thumb traced the fourth rune that had been lit up. The fourth rune represented the Spirit Tool having reached Late E-grade, just one step from the Peak. The first rune was the one that let him release Verun and have it join him in battle, and it was what truly set it apart from most beastcrafted Spirit Tools.

This activation both cost a huge amount of blood and had a pretty long cooldown, so it could only be used sparingly. The second rune was far cheaper, and it had a pretty common effect, sharpness. It used some sort of sanguine power to empower the edge, providing it with a stronger penetrative force. It cost a decent chunk of blood, but Zac still often used it when he needed a bit of extra lethality in his swings.

The third rune was both useful and useless, since he hadn’t had cause to activate it apart from trying it out. It activated an odd ability that could best be described as molting, probably a result of feeding **[Verun’s Bite]** dragon’s blood. The outer layer of the axe-head would become brittle and fall off as a new layer grew to replace it. Zac initially had some difficulty figuring out what good that ability was, but soon realized it was a type of empowered restoration.

[Verun’s Bite] had the ability to sharpen and recover from damage like most Spirit Tools, but the process was pretty slow.

With the weapon being of such high quality, the small blemishes Zac accrued from battles were easily fixed, making the third ability a bit superfluous. However, Zac felt the ability would come in handy sooner or later as he fought stronger and stronger enemies.

After all, the passive regeneration could take days, whereas the active ability took just a few seconds. As long as he could stall for a bit, he could even use the ability in the middle of a fight. It might even be able to allow Verun to survive where most Spirit Tools would break, which was an extremely precious insurance policy.

Now the axe had a fourth ability, and knowing what it did made Zac all the more cognizant of the importance of finding the right food for Verun. The fourth ability built further on the most fundamental aspect of the Treasure Bone—weight.

Activating the rune could almost instantly increase the weight to a level so great, even Zac could barely withstand it. The ability suited Zac's combat style very well, and it meshed perfectly with his Fragment of the Axe. The Fragment was fused from the Seeds of Heaviness and Sharpness, matching two of the axe's abilities perfectly.

Zac knew he had lucked out a bit though, and would have to be a bit more discerning going forward. It wasn't just a matter of getting a bad ability by feeding it the wrong thing, but he also risked turning the weapon less compatible with his path. That was doubly important when he would evolve the weapon to D-grade. He would have to make sure it aligned with his path perfectly by that point, though Zac still didn't know how he'd accomplish that.

Only the agate was left behind after having extracted [**Verun's Bite**], and the gemstone had already dimmed somewhat now that there weren't any Supreme Twilight Crystals to siphon energy from. Zac went to work, digging into the ground around the gem, forming a two-meter pedestal to hold the gemstone in place.

The [**Mind's Eye Agate**] entered his Spatial Ring to join the Twilight Crystals, and Zac turned to an intangible wraith

after taking a look around. A few seconds later, he appeared in the main tunnels of the crystal mine, and he swept forward, occasionally ripping a crystal from the walls. Normally, he would have taken every single crystal, leaving just a mottled wall behind.

Unfortunately, he wasn't in any position to do so. Now that he was on the move, crushing crystals to alleviate the ambient energy wasn't nearly as effective. Even he couldn't stomach the cost of crushing one every second as he rushed through the tunnels, and there was no point in leaving gusts of pure energy in his wake.

He needed to cover as much distance as possible while he had the energy to run **[Void Zone]**, which meant he only extracted the most valuable crystals and herbs, leaving the rest behind.

Zac made steady progress, and the occasional beast that was unlucky enough to find itself in his way was quickly disposed of as Zac used them as target practice to get used to the new weight of his weapon. He didn't really ascend toward the surface, but rather worked his way in the direction of what should be the water of the Twilight Chasm.

Until now, he'd wanted to move as far into the bedrock as possible to avoid discovery from either the snake or trial-takers. Now that it was time to get out of here, it would be far quicker to simply climb up the wall with the help of his chains. He certainly couldn't move as quickly while defying the constant tug of the currents, but he also wouldn't waste hours backtracking back and forth in the hard-to-traverse cave system.

It took him the better part of a day to reach his destination, mostly because he finally had to stop and run his Soul-Strengthening Manual to expel Twilight Energy, but he eventually reached a section that was completely submerged in water. From there, it took another two hours until he found his way out of the massive network of cracks and tunnels that had been his sanctuary for the past eight months.

First, he spent another ten hours restoring his Void Energy, after which he made his move. The calm and somewhat brackish water of the cave system was soon replaced by the torrential currents of the chasm. He scanned the area, but neither the monstrous snake nor any other obvious threat was anywhere in sight.

Two chains dug into the stone as the other two crawled upward along the sheer mountain wall. They extended for over two hundred meters before they slammed into the stone while oozing black tar. It was **[Blighted Cut]** that empowered them with a much greater penetrative force, and the stone bubbled as it melted to let the chains dig deeper.

Zac dragged himself farther and farther up, but he froze in fear after just twenty minutes as he spotted something enormous looming above. He felt his hands shake in fear of being discovered. Eventually he calmed down when he realized he wasn't really dealing with the gargantuan pet of the Eveningtide Asura.

He still couldn't make out what it was, but after climbing for another ten minutes, he finally figured it out. It was a mountain, if you could call it that. It might be more accurate to call it a mountain-sized rock hovering in the chasm, seemingly unaffected by the constant pull from the depths. Zac could only see its bottom, but it was just as large as the mountains he'd climbed before.

Was this the true nature of the peaks of the Twilight Chasm?

Rather than actual mountains connected to the ground, perhaps the peaks that people searched at the top of the chasm were nothing more than oversized rocks. The same possibly went for the peaks he traversed farther down. In fact, who knew how many layers of mountains were stacked like this in the endless depths of this place.

A couple of minutes later, a few more peaks came into view, silently hovering in place like the first one. Zac looked at them thoughtfully, remembering the purpose of the peaks below. Were these mountains part of some array as well,

perhaps? An obstinate part in the back of Zac's mind wanted him to swim over and cause some damage if that was the case, to show the Eveningtide Asura that he was not so easily pushed around.

However, the vast majority of Zac held onto his sanity, knowing there was a time and place for everything. He did want to throw a wrench in the works of the Eveningtide Asura, but that was ultimately more about self-perseverance than spite. Something massive was going down on the outside, and the events inside the trial could clearly affect the outcome, judging by how the various factions were going all out sending their elites into the Twilight Ocean.

The more of Alvod's preparations Zac undid, the less time the Eveningtide Asura would have to spare on a junior who slighted him. He would be knee-deep in whatever the B-grade factions had prepared. Zac just couldn't overdo it. If he caused too much trouble and his actions were exposed, Alvod might very well hunt him down out of spite.

He needed to figure out which side everyone was on, and subtly assist the Eveningtide Asura's enemies.

He looked away from the mountains, focusing on covering as much ground as possible. As he climbed, he became increasingly shocked at just how deep this place was. Four days passed, and he found himself passing two layers of mountain ranges. But finally, Zac saw an end to his climb as the oppressive darkness started to give way to weak golden light.

Four hours later, Zac found his surroundings properly illuminated, and he finally found himself able to cope with the environment without relying on his Soul Strengthening Array. As expected, he'd been climbing the actual wall of the chasm all this while, and if he kept going for another hour, he would reach the crest.

However, Zac didn't climb the final stretch to the edge. He pushed out from the wall, shooting toward the closest mountain in the distance. He was eager to leave this ominous place, but there was one thing he wanted to do first. With

things having reached this point, Zac decided to see if he could harvest the odd egg.

Zac had been able to sense his brand for a while now, and the mark had grown a lot stronger since he'd planted it nine months ago. His original plan was to fetch the two Remnants and then return for the egg, but the events in the depths of the chasm probably ruined those plans.

He doubted he would be able to continue exploring the Twilight Ocean after forming the Glimpse of Chaos, so this might be the last chance to recover it. He could still sense that the mark hadn't really "matured," but there was no other way.

It thankfully looked like the currents had dragged him almost straight down after Uona knocked him unconscious. It wasn't too far a distance he needed to travel to get back to the mountain peak that housed the hidden valley. There was a small chance Uona was waiting for him over there, but he doubted it considering her points had been steadily climbing about five months ago. She was most likely off hunting cultivators elsewhere.

Zac reached the very same spot where the hidden tunnel was located a few days later, and there were no signs of anyone lying in wait. Unfortunately, there was also no clear way for him to get inside without the egg acting as a key to open the path. He spent the next few days swimming back and forth, trying everything from brute force to dumb luck to break into the valley.

No matter what he tried, the area was completely sealed off, the rock shockingly resistant to his efforts to dig into it. Eventually, he returned to the location of the tunnel to see if there was anything he'd missed.

The mark felt like a taunting beacon, reminding him of the fact that the thing he desperately wanted was just out of reach. The sense of impotence once more returned, and Zac growled in annoyance as two streams of Dao entered his shoulders. A small mark appeared, and he pushed it into the stone as he kept picturing the tunnel opening up.

Using his ace at this juncture was a risk, but Zac refused to give up now that he'd come back to this place. The mountain wall shuddered in reluctance, but Zac felt a transformation starting to take place. It was much slower compared to before, but the stone was starting to become intangible.

Just as Zac thought he'd succeeded, the wall started to revert back into stone as a pulse emerged from the heart of the mountain. Zac stared at the wall with aggravation. He'd failed, but he didn't even have time to consider backup plans before the wall shuddered once more.

At the same time, the brand on the other side of the wall went from a beacon to a raging fire, and the connection between himself and the mark grew exponentially stronger. Zac gaped in shock as the tunnel appeared, this time covered in the intricate runes that started to cover the valley just as he left the last time.

However, there was an indiscernible difference this time. While the runes had only held the prime truths of Twilight before, they were now speckled with a hint of something more, something that belonged to Zac. The energy of Creation. His gaze turned toward the egg, but the hallway was completely covered in a thick haze seemingly wrought out of the Dao itself.

It moved like it was alive, and small glimmering specks within the dust made the churning shroud look like a star-speckled nebula. Staring at the swirling clouds made his drained soul fill with inspiration, and he almost entered a state of epiphany then and there.

However, a wave of panic broke his trance as the walls started to shudder ominously. The runes flickered, seemingly in a struggle against themselves. The tunnel that shouldn't have opened had been forced open, but it clearly wouldn't last long. Zac threw caution to the wind and shot forward, not caring about what kind of dangers might lurk within.

If just the clouds that had escaped the valley were this marvelous, how could he let go of the opportunity that waited within?

DISSENTING VIEWS

Zac felt like he was tearing through the veil of the Heavens as he pushed through the haze, embraced by life and death as they joined each other in a nebulous soup. Of course, Zac believed something even greater brewed in the depths of the valley, and **[Love's Bond]** was already stirring in anticipation. The chains gingerly stroked the runes in the tunnel, and the Dao clouds shuddered in turn as the two resonated.

Each physical step also felt like a metaphorical step down his path, and Zac's original purpose of entering this place was starting to become muddled as he approached the mouth of the tunnel. A small part of his reason for coming here was to foil whatever designs Va Tapek had for this realm, but it seemed so insignificant now. The same was true for the Eveningtide Asura. What were they in front of the Grand Dao?

Murmurs of the most profound truths of the Twilight Ocean whispered into Zac's ear as he approached the light, but even he hadn't expected what waited for him at the other side. What was this?

It was like he'd somehow been transported to the depths of the cosmos, to the origin of the universe, where all matter and truth was reduced to a primordial farrago. Base concepts that tethered him to the mundane realities of existence held no sway in the storm he found himself in, and he was becoming a stain that blemished a perfect tapestry.

The tunnel was gone. The Twilight Ocean and the surface were gone. All that remained was the Dao and the runes that spun all around him in a dance that codified reality. Life

wasn't life. Death wasn't death. Truth was malleable, and it changed as the runes swirled, forming a river that was ever changing, yet always the same.

Of course, there was also the throne. Standing in the middle of the chaos was a point of order, and on its pedestal, the seed was still beating, each thump deepening the water of the river around him. The egg was barely recognizable, having transformed from something physical into a concept.

Millions upon millions of runes formed a tapestry that, while no larger than an ostrich egg, contained a whole universe. It had drawn upon the essence of the Twilight Ocean and distilled it into something greater, something higher. Was this true Dao? Looking at his own avatars, Zac felt like a caveman producing a fledgling fire while looking up at the stars, not able to grasp the vast chasm between the two.

It terrified Zac, and it enthralled him.

Thump.

Zac was now closer, standing at the foot of majesty, his soul weeping with inadequacy. Had he walked the distance or was he simply moved here because this was his destined terminus? His sanity frayed around a small core tethering him to the mortal world, and that frayed lifeline was screaming at him to take that thing and get out.

Thump.

He stood on the altar, his skin transforming to conform to the higher truth of this valley. It was slowly gaining a greenish tint, and indistinct runes flickered before once more disappearing. They were of no script Zac could recognize, but they roared like crashing waves of Twilight. This was not a matter of being overrun by a deluge of sludge, it was losing one's fundamental essence in front of a deeper gospel.

The fundamental core of Zac's being was being supplanted. He barely registered it as his gaze was locked on something marvelous. The egg was not the only thing on the altar. There was something else, something perhaps even more precious than the insight locked in the avatar of Twilight itself.

It was a bead of distilled light hovering right above the egg. Its true appearance was blocked out by four layers of shockingly complex runes. Each beat of the egg released a crashing tsunami of Twilight, but only the most perfected pieces of the tapestry were allowed to enter the arrays enclosing the light.

Zac didn't know why, but it felt like that thing was unsullied by nature, and arrays were the only thing protecting it from being indelibly stained. However, the sanctuary the arrays were providing was slowly being corroded by design, and he knew this pure light would eventually be swallowed by the river that coursed through this valley. The river of Twilight.

His mind was a chaotic struggle, ripped between the desire to protect and the desire to devour. His companion didn't have the same compunctions, and four chains shot forward, targeting the gestating truth of the ocean. A small mark of endless possibility cried in his mind with the desire to fulfill its natal edict, to be consumed, and in that way, find new life.

But no matter what the Spirit Tool tried, it was unable to dislodge the egg. If anything, it had become a cemented part of the area. The core of this universe, an eternal fixture that couldn't simply be moved or taken away. Every moment Zac felt himself eroding. Something had to change.

Suddenly, a mad idea took form as Zac looked down at the glowing avatar of Twilight. In its current state, it was unapproachable, an extension of the ocean itself. Taking it was as impossible as stealing the whole Mystic Realm.

But what if it was no longer an avatar of Twilight, but an avatar of his own? The more he thought about it, the more it started to make sense. And as his idea sprouted, nurtured by greed and his path, so did the swirling clouds around him lose their luster, the runes no longer mesmerizing in their profundity.

"It's wrong," Zac muttered, his abyssal eyes wide with mania as his silver hair danced in the wind. "It's all wrong.

Life is Life. Death is Death. Forever separate, always in conflict.”

Two storms of Dao and ancient madness surged out from his mind and into his shoulders. It was Life and Death, unsullied and eternal. Twilight was just a half measure, a mockery of Chaos. It was a poison, and he was the cure.

Conviction pushed him forward, but Zac was all too aware of the gravity of his action, of the risks. This was not the time or place to form the Glimpse of Chaos. He didn't have two intact Remnants to provide the fuel for the fusion. What was left was his soul and his life force, both of which would probably be drained beyond a breaking point to conjure that glimpse.

Zac desperately pushed the two forces apart before they had a chance to fuse in his chest, even if doing so felt like breaking his soul apart. He pushed and pushed, and two storms surged through his arms, pouring out into the radiant egg.

A clap of thunder shook the cosmos, and Zac was thrown dozens of meters away, his body racked with pain. The nebulous clouds churned and cried as he pushed through them in his desire to return, ignoring the mounting feeling of wrongness of the runes around him. The intricate patterns inside the seed of Twilight shuddered and fluctuated wildly, its millions of small runes warping into something new.

And as the egg changed, so did the universe.

A cascading ripple spread through the valley, with the delicate system of Twilight unraveling as it was supplanted by something that resonated with Zac's soul. However, he immediately spotted a problem. While the original tapestry around him had felt like a cop-out, a defeat in the face of the true peaks of the Grand Dao, it was complete, a self-sufficient system existing in harmony with itself and the universe.

Meanwhile, the chaotic storm he'd introduced into the system was just that, a storm.

It was raw power that might hold the potential for a peak creation. But for now, it was incomplete, insignificant insights

nibbling at the edges of the truth. Zac didn't exactly know what this place was designed to accomplish, but his own Dao was not up to the task. It would sooner or later break apart, even when powered by the distilled essence of the Remnants.

Before that happened, he needed to make his move.

"Take it," Zac said with gritted teeth, and the chains stormed the egg with rapid ferocity, clawing at it with desperate hunger.

Yet it was hopeless. It was still fixed in place, the core of this microcosm of Dao. Zac sensed a wave of disappointment, followed by the coffin lid slightly opening to start absorbing the dense clouds of Dao in the valley. It looked like Alea had given up, opting to make the best of a bad situation.

Zac shook his head with a sigh, and thoughts of escape started to take hold. However, he spotted something changing. The arrays protecting that pure beam of light were fast crackling, suddenly looking like brittle glass as they were imbued with the distilled inspiration wrought from Zac's path. They clearly weren't designed or able to hold the energy the egg was now releasing.

Part of him was elated, and the other part horrified. He could feel it. When the arrays broke apart, that light would be gone forever, like a star being extinguished. It would become sullied by the mundane, and the world would be a little bit worse for it. He couldn't sit by and watch it unfold, but what could he do?

Another crack echoed, and Zac lurched forward and swallowed the light before it was too late.

It must have looked like Zac swallowed a sun, but there was no searing pain spreading through his body. If anything, his body was wrapped in a soothing embrace, no longer beset by the overpowering Daos in the valley. His body had become the Heavens itself, a universe unto its own.

Some of the light illuminated his soul, and his three Dao avatars blazed to life, each one radiating an unprecedented verve. He wasn't in a state of inspiration, he was the Dao

itself. But the blinding radiance of supremacy was slowly wearing off, and perfection was slipping through his fingers.

That piece of Heaven he'd swallowed was not so easily absorbed, in a way he had never encountered before. This was not like when swallowing the Cosmic Water or a treasure beyond his grade. He didn't feel like exploding. Rather, he felt like a leaking sieve, where his body simply couldn't hold that miraculous light.

The infinitely pure understanding was gradually leaving him, decomposing into lower Dao the moment it touched the environment. Try as he might, Zac found absolutely no way to stem the tide. Zac sighed with despondency, but his eyes soon regained a sense of purpose. Why lament over the loss of borrowed glory when he should make the most of this precious moment in time?

While incomplete, he'd branded the egg with his Dao, and it had, in turn, distilled it into something greater, something that was now on full display in the valley. The runes that once held the Tapestry of Twilight now held a ratified version of his path. Zac smiled as he suddenly disappeared from the pedestal.

Thump.

[**Verun's Bite**] ripped through the glittering veils shrouding the valley, its primordial roars echoing the lust for power. Each swing left golden arcs behind as motes of stardust stuck to the bone edge. The arcs seemed like the leaves of the Bodhi, not one exactly the same as the others.

It was alive, ever changing and evolving, eternally struggling against death. It was the predator stalking its prey; it was the plant mutating to endure the harshening summers. It was everything, constantly adapting. It might be struck down, but it would never give in. It would rise again to defy fate, stronger, evolved. And this dance would continue until the end of time.

Thump.

The Dao clouds churned as they were ripped apart by four chains dancing to the tune of inevitability, streaks of darkness

forming an inescapable cage. They sealed everything they encircled, like a spider trapping its prey. It was patient, since death would always win in the end. They were the grinding gears of time, the inexorability of fate.

Clouds of Dao kept being swallowed, as this path was always taking and never giving.

Thump.

He was conflict, ever changing, never ending.

He was a storm that raged through the valley, and the cosmos itself answered his call. His body shone with radiant luster as the impossibly pure Dao left his body. However, while he couldn't contain it, it had still been marked by his path. And as it changed, so did the valley. The runes that danced all around him were no longer a river. They had split into two armies that were locked in an epic struggle.

The murky green had turned into shimmering gold and oppressive black, life and death.

This was the truth of Twilight. Such a fragile harmony was bound to be broken as the convoluted ultimately returned to the primal. Oblivion is the inevitable end of Creation, just as Creation invariably will follow Oblivion. Each clash would birth something new, just like each swing of his axe could change his fate.

A thousand scenes flashed through his mind as Zac kept swinging his weapon, memories that had led him down the path he now stood on. Try to avoid it as he might, conflict was inexorable. To accomplish anything in this universe, he would have to keep fighting. If he wanted to change the fate he'd been dealt, he would have to keep struggling.

Zac felt his momentum increasing, and the gently swirling clouds of stardust were swept up in the hurricane of his path. Raging wind blasted the black and golden runes, forcing them into even greater clashes. The world shook and thundered, but Zac kept swinging, feeling he was getting closer and closer... to something.

His movements were mirrored by the avatar in his mind. No longer did it sit on top of his Soul Core, but rather danced on top of the waters of the two oceans. The fading radiance of the bead of light still illuminated its body, and torrential amounts of the Dao clouds entered his avatar form.

A swing from the avatar illuminated the deathly ocean with streaks of golden light, and a swipe subdued the golden ocean with the threat of death. With every breath, Zac's movement grew more precise, and a dense aura spread out from his body. And as his aura spread, the struggling runes subtly changed.

One moment they were life and death locked in their eternal struggle, the next moment weapons clashing in a pitched war. Zac felt his momentum reaching a precipice, and his Dao Field congealed. First, it became a condensed ball of his insight hovering above his head, and soon took a more distinct shape.

It was two axes reaching over twenty meters into the air, one glimmering in gold and the other shrouded in darkness. They both emitted an aura of supremacy, neither willing to give in. Their edges were locked against each other, and the pressure they exerted impacted reality itself. The surroundings twisted and cried from their mere presence, their conflict being imprinted into space itself.

Suddenly, crashing thunder intruded on the scene, and Zac's abyssal eyes widened as the secluded valley of life and death had been encroached upon by churning clouds crackling with purple lightning. A boundless fury subdued the clouds of swirling Dao beneath, and the shimmering runes fast lost their luster. Not even the egg dared to keep beating, now once more a simple stone.

Soon enough, only Zac and the two axes remained, the rest shrouded by the descending clouds. The True Heavens had descended, unwilling to share the truths of the Dao.

This was the price of the Boundless Path.

Zac was undeterred. He raised his axe, and the massive projection shrank before entering [**Verun's Bite**], prompting it

to give off a hair-raising aura. Meanwhile, the avatar in his soul returned to its position on top of the Soul Core, its presence rapidly rising.

The Heavens were clearly enraged by Zac's actions, and he was drowned in purple light as it gathered its punishment. A bolt of condensed wrath descended, and Zac swung his axe in an upward arc, unleashing a wave of terrifying destruction as a smile spread across his face. The Heavens wanted a conflict, but that would only solidify his Dao.

However, the smile turned crooked as the two forces clashed, followed by his outburst of Dao being instantly crushed. The bolt continued completely undiscouraged, and slammed into Zac like the fist of an angry god, the force so tremendous that cracks spread across the now-exposed valley. Another bolt soon followed as thunder crashed, and Zac's vision blurred as he desperately tried to bear the electrified fury.

Suddenly, he lost his footing as a massive section of the valley simply crumbled, unable to withstand the presence of the lightning tribulation. He felt a surge of ocean water come crashing toward him, but he barely had time for a final thought as a third bolt knocked him unconscious.

Uh-oh.

IMPRINTS

Zac woke up with a start, his mind scattered by the electrifying experience he'd endured. He instinctively raised his arms to block the punishment from above, but the oppressive presence of the Heavens was gone. It still took some time for his mind to snap back into focus, and he breathed in relief upon realizing his surroundings weren't shrouded in oppressive darkness.

He was still illuminated by the dark gold of the sky above the surface, meaning he hadn't been dragged into the depths. He looked around to orient himself. He was actually hanging from a ledge, the four chains of **[Love's Bond]** lodged into the wall to prevent him from being carried away by the currents.

It looked like Alea had saved his bacon when the lightning tribulation knocked him out. A wave of shame hit him, and he shook his head as he dragged himself up to the ledge. He'd entered the valley to find a way for Alea to evolve, yet it was he who had snatched the opportunity.

Certainly, the egg had been impossible to bring away even after he risked it all, but he hadn't even stopped to consider whether **[Love's Bond]** might have wanted that amazing bead of pure light. He just shot forward and gobbled it up like a frenzied beast.

"I'll find a way to make it up to you, I promise," Zac sighed as he caressed one of the chains. There was no response, as usual.

However, there was one startling change, and Zac looked at the chain with marvel. It was still pure black like it had been since the start, but it was now covered in a somewhat familiar pattern. The engravings were black, but they emitted a dense aura of death, making them light up under the scrutiny of **[Cosmic Gaze]**.

The script didn't seem like an actual skill fractal or anything like that. They rather reminded Zac of the markings on the Stele of Conflict. Of course, their instilled meaning wasn't at the same level. The stele held the fundamental truths of conflict, profundity at its highest level. Meanwhile, it looked like **[Love's Bond]** had been marked by the deathly runes that surged like a storm in the valley.

A thought struck Zac, and he took out **[Verun's Bite]** as well. As expected, the axe was covered in similar brands. These markings were golden in color rather than the black of the coffin, and they formed a spiderweb-like array with the red veins that already covered the bone of the edge. Zac looked down at the axe thoughtfully, not sure what to make of the situation.

It really looked like he would have to do something soon.

His axe had already been leaning toward life before this, both from the nature of beastcrafted weapons and from the treasures it had eaten. It was instilled with the unsurpassed life force of the dragons, and it had drunk the blood of innumerable beasts to complement its nature. Now, it was covered with patterns that held the essence of Life.

While it was great for his human class, it might become a problem for his current form. Should he get another axe to complement Verun? Or should he try to instill another set of brands on the weapon, adding death to the life? Both solutions had their pros and cons, but now wasn't the time to go over it.

Things had gone out of control once again, and he beheld the surroundings with some helplessness. The mountain that held the secluded valley was partly gone, ripped at least into two parts. The ledge he was on was probably a section of the

edge of the valley, judging by the scorched runes that were engraved on the rock.

But the rest of the valley itself was simply gone.

There was just ocean as far as the eye could see, meaning the pedestal, the egg, and most of the runes most likely had been dragged to the depths of the Twilight Chasm. His whole body hurt, but he couldn't stay. The last time he'd come to this place, the outburst had been just a shadow of what he unleashed today, and who knew how many elites were on the way to investigate the commotion.

He took one last look at the scorched walls, the marks that once held the Tapestry of Twilight all but illegible, and he scratched the back of his head with a wry smile as he set off. For a moment there, he'd felt like a true Heaven's Chosen, seizing the Dao and bending it to his will. However, the True Heavens wasn't messing around, slapping him back to reality before he had a chance to properly enjoy the experience.

As to why he was mostly fine, it was clear his **[Void Heart]** had come through for him. It'd been completely silent since he woke up a few moments ago, and Zac's chest was all pins and needles, covered in red scars that looked like angry veins. It was no doubt a side effect of the node having drawn all the tribulation lightning into the Void before it could cause any real damage.

Luckily, he had activated his **[Void Zone]** just before getting zapped the final time. It hadn't managed to impede the tribulation lightning at all for some reason, but it did allow him to avoid getting overwhelmed by Twilight Energy while out of commission. Going by the amount of Void Energy left in the tank, Zac figured he hadn't actually been unconscious for more than a couple of minutes.

Zac pushed through the churning water as quickly as he could muster, heading toward the center of the chasm rather than back toward the edge. Almost an hour passed, at which point he was finally forced to deactivate the field of nullification that kept the Twilight Energy at bay. Zac braced

himself for a struggle now that he didn't have his hidden node to help, and was surprised to see it wasn't that bad at all.

It was like the Twilight Energy was suddenly unable or perhaps unwilling, to burrow into his body. He was beset by less than a third of the invasive infiltration compared to before. His first instinct was that it was thanks to his breakthrough, but he soon concluded that wasn't the case. Having a greater foundation would help against the Twilight Energy, but the effect wasn't this pronounced.

Something else had changed, and Zac didn't need to be a betting man to figure that it was related to the events inside the valley. He wasn't sure if the effect was permanent or not, but for now, he would make the most of it as he created some distance from the shattered mountain.

Zac made good time over the next few hours, and passed by four mountains until he finally stopped. At that point he found a secluded cave and sealed it up, hiding himself to go over his gains. Having the marks of his path engraved on his Spirit Tools was an unexpected boon, but that obviously wasn't the biggest win of the day.

The blue screen listing his Dao appeared, and Zac looked at it with marvel.

Branch of the War Axe (Early): All attributes +50, Strength +2,250, Dexterity +1,000, Endurance +150, Wisdom +250. Effectiveness of Strength +25%.

Evolving the Dao to a Branch unfortunately didn't quite result in a doubling of its attributes, with the flat boost going from 2,250 to 4,000. However, the real gain with a Dao Branch was the force it brought to bear in a fight rather than the jump in stats. It was a qualitative leap in how it empowered skills, in a far more palpable way compared to the difference between a High and Peak Dao Fragment.

Zac had experienced the difference during his fight with Yanub Mettleleaf. His defenses had simply crumbled in the face of the treant's Dao Branch, like he was trying to block a raging flame with a paper sheet. With this, Zac felt he wouldn't be completely outmatched in a direct clash with the

Rankers of the trial, though the top names no doubt were still a bit out of his reach even with this latest breakthrough.

Going into the valley, he hadn't expected to progress his Dao at all, yet he'd walked out with a Dao Branch. With how recently he'd evolved his Fragment of the Axe to the Peak, he figured he was years of building a foundation from actually taking this step. But that light had changed everything.

Thinking back to it, Zac still couldn't believe how magical that thing was. It was so far beyond any Dao Treasure or Origin Dao he'd encountered so far. It was a blank slate, yet it contained everything. He hadn't even managed to absorb 1% of the light before it slipped out of his body, yet it had pushed him this far. If he'd managed to make use of even half its efficacy, he might very well have pushed all his Daos to the limits of the E-grade.

If he could only get more...

Zac shook his head, knowing he was being too greedy. He hadn't even heard of something like that before, meaning it was beyond rare. Either it was something that could only be encountered by chance or something that was hoarded by the people at the top. And after going over the events in the valley, Zac started to feel he had a better understanding of what was going on there, and the implications weren't great.

The mystical egg that Va Tapek had made him bring here was some sort of purifier. The mountain had most likely contained an ancient gathering array, and the empowered Twilight Energy entered the egg through the pedestal.

The egg, in turn, purified and elevated the base concepts that were the foundation of Twilight Energy, and the result was the mysterious runes and Dao clouds swirling around in the valley. However, even those miraculous things were just a by-product, with the essence of the egg's output being steered toward the light above it.

Zac had felt the effect of that light on his own Dao. It didn't connect him to the mighty, yet distant, Grand Dao like Yrial's impartment had. For a moment, he was the Dao. While

the light shone on his soul, he'd understood it as clearly as though it were his second nature.

Before he entered, he hadn't actually been clear on what form his first Dao Branch should take. But seeing the runes of his path swirling around him, the clashing war between Life and Death, something clicked. Of course, it was all thanks to that light guiding the way. And it was still just as clear as before, in contrast to how he felt after most bouts of inspiration.

Focusing on his path allowed him to learn and consolidate the part of the Dao of Conflict that he needed, infusing it into what was now the Branch of the War Axe. The added epithet of "War" to his Dao was based on conflict, and it had been symbolized by the very struggle between life and death that was central to his path.

He was a bit unclear on the purpose of infusing Twilight into the miraculous light though. It had such an amazing effect in its pure state, and adding something external felt like it would just blemish it. Was it about efficacy, that the light was hard to absorb normally? The light provided earth-shattering benefits to an E-grade cultivator like him, but for a Monarch, it might be insufficient.

As to who was growing beads of Supreme Twilight in the heart of the chasm, it wasn't hard to figure out. The real question was why the hell Va Tapek was working with the Eveningtide Asura. Until now, Zac had worked under the assumption that Catheya's master had been working alone, maybe in conjunction with the other Monarchs from the Undead Empire.

But from the looks of it, that wasn't the case, unless he had completely misunderstood something about the purpose of that valley.

Zac gave up trying to figure it out. There was simply too much he didn't know, from cultivation to the motives to the old monsters outside. One thing was for sure, if Alvod found out he was behind this as well, then he might very well be in

deep shit. Hopefully, his sight had been blocked after being booted by the System, but Zac still had a bad feeling.

Unable to do much about the situation, Zac turned his sight inward, and he breathed in relief upon seeing that his body was in its normal state. He still remembered how his body had started to transform for a moment, his skin turning green as markings covered his hands. In fact, he'd seen that exact phenomenon before, on the avatar of the Eveningtide Asura. That was the second clue that he had inadvertently thrown a wrench into Alvod's plans rather than Va Tapek's.

Zac had made a cursory scan before, but it really looked like the odd effect had been dispelled either by the Dao light or by him renouncing the path of Twilight. Unlike his weapons, Zac didn't get a set of patterns of his own. He still looked like a normal Draugr without any mysterious runes to represent his path. Perhaps there was something else that had changed with his body.

Miasma started coursing through his pathways following a set pattern, but there was no response from the energy around him. Zac tried again, this time with a different cultivation manual, but the result was the same. Nothing. He'd held onto a small lingering hope after being so in tune with the cosmos for a while, but it looked like he still was a piddling mortal.

His affinity hadn't increased at all, and a few experiments confirmed that his Dao control wasn't any better either.

Still, Zac figured it might be for the best, and he turned his gaze toward his soul aperture. His soul might have been the area that most directly benefitted from being washed in the glow of the Dao. As expected, the oceans in his mind had once more been elevated to even greater heights, and watching the waves crashing against each other almost felt like watching a Dao-instilled treasure like the Big Boss' Big Wall.

More importantly, it felt like the oceans were more in tune with himself. It wasn't like he could command them at will, but their insights better matched his own. And it wasn't really a surprise. Before, they'd mostly been infused by the insights

hidden inside the Twilight Energy, with some scraps coming from Divine Crystals and Miasma Crystals.

But now, the water had gobbled up and copied the very essence of his path thanks to the bright light and the almost endless amount of Dao in the valley. The two avatars of Bodhi and Coffin looked mostly the same, though Zac noted they were a bit larger compared to before. He didn't really know what that meant, but figured it was a good thing since they also felt more real somehow.

It could simply mean he'd solidified his foundation, taking him one step closer to forming his other two branches.

The biggest transformation was obviously the Dao avatar that represented his Branch of the War Axe. It sat on top of his Soul Core, with an axe in hand, but it almost felt like a real being rather than an avatar. Furthermore, it kept changing. Zac curiously observed the avatar as it transformed. The avatar had looked like him in his human form before, but it was now in a constant flux between his two identities.

One second it was a human, the next a Draugr, though the Draugr had his true appearance rather than the one Zac used for Arcaz Black. As it switched back and forth, so did the weapon in its hand change. Unsurprisingly, it was the very same axes Zac had conjured while forming the branch.

One was pitch-black and wrapped in chains, emitting an extremely oppressive aura. Zac felt suffocated just looking at it, like those chains were binding him rather than securing the edge to the handle. It was inexorability taken form.

His human form instead held an axe radiating a golden gleam, yet Zac found it impossible to pinpoint what kind of axe it was. One moment it looked a bit like the hatchet he'd used when the integration took place, and in another, it resembled **[Verun's Bite]**. But it also looked like a thousand other axes all at once, always changing unpredictably.

The change in the avatar no doubt reflected the integration of Dao and path. The insight he added to his Fragment of the Axe was mainly related to conflict and struggle, and it was filtered through the two stances he'd developed over the last

year. Yet, as he looked at the two weapons the avatar held, they never emitted an aura of either life or death even if they clearly represented those paths.

It was a pure branch, rather than mixing it with snippets from his other Daos. It was possible he would try something like that in the future to better integrate his other two Daos into the Dao of the Axe, but for now, he felt it more prudent to delve deeper into conflict, since it was what bound his Daos together.

There were no other changes he could find, but that was more than enough. He'd had pretty high hopes for the Twilight Ascent before entering, and the gains had far surpassed what he even dared hope for. His attributes had more than doubled since Kenzie was taken and Thea killed, and most of it was thanks to the Twilight Ocean.

Now, he just needed to make sure he survive all the enmities he'd created getting this far. First off, he needed to leave the chasm before the Eveningtide Asura returned with a vengeance.

FOLLY OF THE BOUNDLESS

Ogras grunted with disgust as he chewed on the astringent mixture of herbs. The sickly heat radiating from the wound on his back was soon replaced by a cooling wave, proof that his makeshift antidote did at least work to some degree. It would take a lot more to rid himself of that sinister poison, but there was no opportunity to properly rest until he reached the next checkpoint.

He didn't know how, but his location was always exposed by those bastards. No matter how well he hid.

The demon sank into the shadows, and his form appeared outside the dilapidated mansion, right in front of the squad of wretched creatures that had hounded him for the past two days. They were no more than a meter tall, but Ogras knew all too well the terror hidden within their diminutive forms.

They looked a bit like goblins, though their skin was a dark mottled purple. They were also covered head to toe in an arcane script that Ogras couldn't make sense of. It felt completely disconnected from the general runes of the Ruthless Heavens, indicating they were wrought in a place outside Heaven's purview.

Their eyes were empty holes filled with sinister energy, and they sparked with malice when they saw their target appear. The goblins needed no order to attack. Their bodies bent and twisted as everything from simple spearpoints to massive maws was created from their forms, attacking Ogras without mercy.

His body cracked like a mirror while two ruthless eyes peered at the scene from a safe distance.

Ten spears wrought with condensed shadows sprang out of the ground, impaling a few members of the war party. The spears were covered in ethereal patterns of their own and imbued with the Peak Fragment of the Umbra to maximize their power. The ten spears targeted six of the goblins, but none actually shot toward a vital.

Instead, they all pierced specific runes that shone brightly on the goblins' bodies, causing a chain reaction of cracks spreading through the script. Four of the goblins instantly shattered and turned to dust, not even leaving a corpse behind. However, the other two withstood the attacks as the runes covering their bodies shuddered and frantically rearranged themselves.

The next moment the shadow spears cracked, and the goblins stood there unaffected by what should have been a lethal strike. Ogras swore. They'd changed the script again. The surviving goblins screeched in fury as their auras rose, and dozens of purple cracks appeared in the sky, each one emitting a cursed aura.

They looked a bit like spatial tears, but Ogras suspected they were something else. Because he'd never seen the Void on the other side of those things, only nightmares. It was one of these scars that had left the nasty wound on his back a month ago, teaching him a valuable lesson about the danger of these creatures.

The cracks spread like a poison on reality, ripping everything in the surroundings to shreds. Decaying trees, walls, and even the ground turned mottled before it was reduced to ash, prompting a storm of dust to swirl through the area. The building where Ogras had rested was reduced to nothingness as one of the goblins drowned it in tears in a fit of fury. It was no skin off Ogras' back.

He'd already receded into the shadows, heading west as he sent another of his shadow puppets running due north. He looked down at his forearm, a small hint of satisfaction on his

face. Another line had been added to his tattoo, meaning there was just one pattern missing to complete the tapestry.

One out of four would have been considered proper shit luck two weeks ago, but he'd hunted these goblin scouts for two weeks without a single one of the two missing lines being filled in. Meanwhile, the creatures had tightened the net in their hunt for him, making every step fraught with danger.

It was worth it, Ogras figured, and he opened the Quest Screen for a boost of motivation.

The folly of the Boundless. (Limited, Trial): Hunt the Qriz'Ul and collect their core runes. Each fully filled pattern will form a key. Reward: Based on the number of keys gained. (4/6)

NOTE: All 6 keys are required to enter the Main Repository.

In the beginning, Ogras felt the mission was easy enough. He recalled the glee upon finding this fragment of a long-lost civilization at the corner of this realm. It had taken the better part of a year of trekking through the worlds that simpleton of a Realm Spirit had swallowed as it gallivanted through the Void.

He'd felt like the chosen one for once, finding ancient ruins at the end of his arduous journey. This was what adventurers dreamt of, the opportunity to rummage through the rotten carcass of a failed society. It was his opportunity to rekindle the dashed hope he felt upon realizing the Mystic Realm back on Earth didn't hold anything of value.

This was a proper Cultivated Realm, where any random building might hold supreme methods and resources. Certainly, none had done so thus far, but he was still locked out of the core sections of this place. As he'd traveled the broken lands, it quickly became clear the civilization had fallen in war—and a war of their own making, by the looks of it.

It had taken him two months and gathering the first sets of tattoos, but it hadn't been too hard to piece together what

happened. And it was a tale as old as time. A tale of hubris and taking shortcuts in the endless pursuit of power. These people, the Ra'Lashar, had clearly dabbled in the unorthodox and mainly cultivated through summoning beings from another plane. The very same beings that now hounded Ogras every waking moment.

What they actually were, Ogras still didn't know. Because they sure as hell weren't goblins. In fact, Ogras had already realized their appearance was a simple form of mimicry, taking the shape of the ones who summoned them. Their true form was some sort of energy creature, and they could even be considered living arrays.

The Qriz'Ul were actually the dense scripts covering the bodies rather than the bodies themselves. The only way he'd found to kill them was by piercing their core runes. And therein lay the problem, because the runes kept changing. He managed to kill four easily enough this time, but the stronger ones were far harder to deal with. Especially considering every drawn-out battle attracted hundreds of these things.

Ogras had never heard of beings such as this. They could pose a huge threat if they ever spread out. He'd seen it, seen how three creatures suddenly split into nine, each one almost as strong as the originals. With that kind of ability to multiply, they would become a blight on any planet they inhabited.

Thankfully, it looked like the civilization that summoned these things understood that fact and had created some sort of multilayered seal that kept these critters inside their kingdom. They even created a trial to cleanse the Qriz'Ul in return for their heritage, which was the quest the Ruthless Heavens provided the moment he stepped through the outermost seal.

Most likely it was an act of vengeance on their killers rather than an act of goodwill, but Ogras didn't care. Killing these things was decent experience, and as soon as the tattoo was filled to the next tier, he would be able to access a higher tier of rewards. And he knew where the final piece of the puzzle waited.

Ogras turned toward the tower far in the distance, his eyes gleaming with desire. Every checkpoint brought him closer to that structure, and the rewards would grow better with every step. Now that this place had been integrated by the Ruthless Heavens, there was no chance for them to balk on the reward either.

That didn't mean there were no hidden traps, but Ogras could turn back at any moment. Between every seal was a secure checkpoint that doubled as an opportunity to exchange his tattoos for riches, and if things got too heated, he'd simply back down. The price of overconfidence was apparent all around him, and he wasn't about to get done in by some devil-goblins.

He was getting out alive from this netherblasted realm, and he'd exchange some of the wealth he accumulated in this prison for a bacchanalia that would make the Succubi of the Twin Lotus Pavilion blush with shame. If he didn't beget a dozen little bastards in whatever town he found outside the Dimensional Seed, then his name wasn't Ogras.

That didn't mean he wouldn't push himself. Every time he considered cashing in, he pictured that dull face. He pictured that annoying smile as one treasure after another fell into that man's paws. He could feel it. Whatever Zachary Atwood was doing right now, he was no doubt falling headfirst into some opportunity while setting the whole sector on fire.

The five years in this virgin world had completely elevated Ogras' prospects and allowed him to make shocking progress. It just wasn't enough. How embarrassing would it be if they met in a couple of years, and that bumbling human had somehow gone even further ahead after Ogras enjoyed this kind of environment for years on end?

It was unacceptable.

So Ogras refocused on the task at hand, following the calling on the incomplete tattoo. When he was missing two marks, it had pointed in every direction, making it completely useless. But now that there was just one piece missing, it was pointing him toward a single location. Ogras had encountered

this phenomenon four times already, and knew the big boss held the final piece of the puzzle.

Killing any more of these troublesome critters would just draw more attention, so he melded with the shadows as he moved through the ruins like a wraith. Eventually, he reached the spot indicated. It was a large domed building that might once have served as a temple. Dozens of Qriz'Ul ambled around at its gate. Ogras noted that not a single one stepped inside.

Using [**Darkside**] to teleport onto one of the balconies would have been the easiest solution, but that was out of the question. These things looked pretty dumb, but they were alert when it came to energy fluctuations. If not for his Fragment of Mirage, he would have been caught innumerable times by now.

Instead, Ogras was forced to crawl closer, making use of brief windows of opportunity where the aimlessly wandering creatures lumbered far enough away that he could sneak a bit closer. Finally, he reached the wall of the temple, and with one fluid motion, dragged himself up along the wall until he reached a secluded balcony five meters up.

He jumped inside, [**Skybreaker**] already at the ready in his hand. He was greeted by an empty room that seemed to have serviced as a scribe's workstation. Old illegible scrolls covered the floor, the ink on the parchment long faded away. The door to the chamber was closed, but it luckily didn't squeak at all as he pushed it open to peer outside.

A nose.

That was all Ogras saw. A nose as large as an Alpha Barghest, full of welts and sinister runes, pointing straight toward the sky in defiance of both beauty and common sense. Ogras' heart almost jumped out of his mouth, and he pushed the door shut again ever so slowly, afraid to startle the thing outside.

How was this fair?

The goblin lying in the domed chamber at the heart of this temple had to be over fifteen meters tall while maintaining its original proportions. It appeared to be sleeping, though Ogras didn't know if these creatures actually slept. He hadn't seen any evidence of them doing so thus far at least.

That creature was not only big, but also filled to the brim with the dark energies of the Qriz'Ul. Ogras guessed it might even have evolved to the next step, though its aura wasn't nearly as deep as his grandpa's. Still, tackling a creature of this magnitude, it was asking too much of him. Even with the skill he got at level 125, Ogras didn't feel confident at all.

"Well, I guess that's it for me," Ogras muttered with reluctance as he turned toward the balcony.

"Are you sure?" a shrill and guttural voice muttered from behind. "I can—ACK!"

The speaker didn't get any further as **[Skybreaker]** pierced straight into its forehead, and the spear turned into a blur as it kept stabbing over and over. Unfortunately, it looked like the attacks were completely ineffectual.

"I'm dead, dammit, so stop trying to kill me," the goblin said with exasperation as he tried to swat the spearhead away, though his hand simply went straight through the weapon. "Look at me, you idiot. Do I have those runes across my skin?"

"Sorry, didn't notice," Ogras lied as he moved toward the balcony, gripping a thick stack of exploding talismans.

Of course he'd noticed, but what did it matter? It wasn't like the original citizens of this place were his allies, even if a few of them had somehow survived. If anything, they might get in the way of him getting to the treasures. Better kill and say a prayer in case the goblin was friendly, than get killed by some rune-parasite-summoning lunatic.

"So long our world has been lost to the river of time, and a bastard like you is the one who finds us," the goblin muttered. "Well, I guess it's destiny."

“Whatever,” Ogras whispered with a roll of his eyes. “What do you want? And speak with a lower volume, you imbecile.”

“Because of that dolt?” the goblin sneered as he glanced at the closed door. “We could sing and dance for an hour without that thing noticing. It’s placed itself in a type of stasis to reserve energy.”

“Good to know,” Ogras shrugged, still whispering. “What do you want?”

“It would be a shame if you left like this,” the goblin grunted. “There are still a lot of Qriz’Ul profaning our final resting place.”

“Well, that’s not my problem. Should have thought of that before you summoned them.”

“Well, that’s true. The second part, that is,” the goblin agreed. “As for the first, I wouldn’t be so sure.”

“Is that a threat?” Ogras asked, his eyes thinning as he tried to figure out if he had any ghost-killing capabilities. Unfortunately, he lacked any life-attuned abilities like those Zachary Atwood possessed.

“Threat? No, an opportunity,” the ghost said with a wide grin. “That Ka’Zur Planeswalker in your body is giving you trouble, no?”

“What are you talking about?” Ogras asked, barely managing to keep his face impassive.

“No need to play dumb with me, brat.” The goblin snickered. “I might just be a figment brought back from the Void to maintain this place, but I was once a Grand Warlock who delved in the arcane for eons. I know one of those shadelings when I see them.”

“And you want to help me?” Ogras said with a raised brow. “Pretty generous for a goblin ghost.”

Simultaneously, his mind was going over what he’d learned of these goblins, comparing it to what the little ghost in front of him was saying. This civilization had almost all

focused on contracting and training nefarious creatures from another realm, using them to fight in their stead. And while these things were distinctly different from Asshole in some regards, they were a bit similar in others.

Were they actually related? Did Asshole come from the same realm as the odd parasites outside? And did that mean their methods might actually be of use for him?

Getting fused with Asshole had led to a higher affinity to shadows, at the risk of his very soul. The Ka'Zur Planeswalker had been quiet for a long time, but Ogras knew it lurked somewhere in the depths of his soul, waiting for the opportunity to pounce. It wouldn't get the chance. However, permanently dealing with Asshole without losing the benefits the creature provided was easier said than done.

If he could impose a Soul Brand on Asshole, he would be completely safe from attack as long as he maintained his cultivation lead. Now, he didn't even dare get too wounded or go all out in a fight for fear that the creature would make a move.

"Generous? Not really, but my hatred for the bastards outside is greater than my indifference to you. This shield won't last forever, and I'm afraid it will break apart before someone more competent than you appears." The goblin shrugged.

"Well, I'm all ears," Ogras said.

"Whoever tampered with that creature in your body didn't know what he was doing," the goblin said as he looked at Ogras with disgust. "You are one, yet separate. One of our great shamans possessed a technique to draw the creatures of the Lost Plane into her body, using them to empower herself. With that method, you will be able to truly make use of the power locked inside you."

"And look how that went for her," Ogras said with a pointed look.

"Our demise was due to another experiment," the goblin said with a roll of his eyes. "Rasata fought to the very end, and

the creatures that fused with her soul never managed to revolt. Of course, the moment she fell, her body became an eldritch horror that accelerated the fall of our civilization. A regrettable quirk, but who cares what happens to our body after we fall? Might as well go out with a bang.”

“And let me guess,” Ogras sighed. “That method is locked inside the tower? Probably guarded by a bunch of supercharged bastards like the big guy outside?”

The widening grin of the goblin was all the answer he needed.

SEAL

Zac would have preferred to enter seclusion for a few days to consolidate his gains, but he was running against the clock. Alvod had given him one month to unblock at least one jammer, and he'd already spent a good chunk of that time climbing the chasm and heading to the valley. He would have to get used to his newfound power on the go.

He soon left the cave, swimming closer to the heart of the Twilight Chasm. Zac didn't want to head back where he came from since that way would take him toward the Living Pulse, which was the opposite of what he wanted. If he had entered the Twilight Chasm from the south, he set a rough course heading northeast.

The Death Pulse should be somewhere in the opposite direction of the Living Pulse, and cutting straight through the surface layer of the Twilight Chasm would save a few weeks of travel time. Hopefully, that would also lessen the chance of encountering elites, since even they usually stayed at the periphery of the chasm.

It wasn't that he was afraid. This deep in the trial he was nigh invulnerable thanks to his resistance to Twilight Energy. But the moment his location was leaked, it would lead to all kinds of trouble. And the top combatants had copious methods to stay alive, making it almost impossible to guarantee his secret being kept.

Of course, not even Zac dared to enter the most central area of the Twilight Chasm, which was purported to be a towering mountain tens of times larger than the ones he'd

climbed here. According to rumors, it stretched tens of thousands of meters above the surface, and held just as great treasures as the deepest depths of the chasm.

It was also crawling with Beast Kings and not something Zac wanted to entangle himself with right now. There was too much to do and too little time. The days passed as he crossed from mountain to mountain, occasionally snatching an herb or mineral that seemed valuable. His senses were constantly stretched to their limits in search of other trial-takers, but he hadn't spotted a single one.

Had he overestimated the elites or were the Rankers busy with something else?

He was, however, constantly targeted by large packs of beasts every time he reached a new mountain. Curiously enough, not a single one of the Beast Kings made an appearance to lead their subordinates, even when Zac could sense their auras hiding deep in the mountains. That only increased the unease Zac felt, and his mind was starting to get frayed after week's travel.

He wasn't scary enough to subdue all the Beast Kings in the chasm, so just what was going on? These behemoths were the most common source of deaths in the chasm, yet he was swimming through their territories unchallenged. Were they lying low because of what transpired in the valley? Had a certain apex predator lurking in the depths made an appearance recently?

Zac didn't know what was the case, and the mystery prompted Zac to push himself to his limit to cross the chasm in record time. With his improved attributes and experience with far deadlier currents in the depths, Zac found himself able to almost effortlessly cover ground. Sometimes, he was even able to hitch a ride with one of the currents, saving hours in one go.

Unfortunately, he did feel that the Twilight Energy was starting to enter his body at a greater and greater rate, meaning the immunity he enjoyed wasn't permanent. Zac wasn't too bothered by that. It would last over a month by the looks of it, and by that time he would be far from the chasm. Another

week passed, and Zac reached the other edge of the chasm, with less than a week to spare before the deadline.

It looked pretty much the same as where he first arrived, a massive wall stretching down into the darkness, with enormous currents rushing into the chasm to turn into submerged waterfalls. He didn't immediately approach, staying hidden on a nearby mountain for almost an hour without making a move.

No matter if it was his Draugr sense or **[Cosmic Gaze]**, he still couldn't spot any cultivators staying by the edge, and it was starting to get to him. There were millions of cultivators participating in the trial, and normally, there should at least be a few thousand who'd venture into the chasm every round.

He gave it some thought, deciding to stay in his Draugr form as he set off toward the edge. His Draugr identity was definitely exposed because of the ladder, making his human identity a lot safer in comparison. Of course, it wasn't a very good disguise considering the bounty on his head, but the prompt required a few seconds to appear.

A few seconds might not sound like a lot, but it was enough to either ambush an unsuspecting party or escape with a talisman. That had been his original idea, but he didn't dare break the array hiding his Duplicity Core unless necessary since gaining the attention of the Eveningtide Asura.

Zac reached the edge and was greeted with a barren landscape that stretched for miles. Still, the scene was filled with a sense of beauty to Zac, who was more than done with the subdued darkness of the Twilight Chasm. Besides, the environment should soon gain some more greenery. It was simply that the currents made it impossible for anything to grow around the edge.

Sure enough, the desolate rocks were replaced by a thick bed of moss and swaying seaweed. Ten minutes later, the grass had grown to over five meters in height, turning the area into a veritable forest. Zac was forced to slow his pace somewhat since this area had to be a prime location for an ambush.

He spotted something amiss, though it wasn't a cultivator lying in wait. It was rather a massive rune that shimmered in the water at the edge of his visibility. It only lasted a second before it disappeared, making it almost seem like the water refractions were playing with his mind. However, after the first one came another, and two turned into innumerable runes that stretched across the horizon.

It was like the whole Twilight Chasm had been cordoned off by some sort of array. Zac took out the array disk for his quest. For the second time, the tracker indicated a spot not too far away. The first time was when he'd almost finished his climb on the opposite side of the chasm.

By the looks of it, the location was situated right beneath the line demarcated by the gargantuan array. These runes were connected to whatever jammers the Twilight Lord wanted removed, and they probably stretched all around the Twilight Chasm. The question was what kind of array had been set up, and who was behind it?

The native clans being behind this seemed a distinct possibility, considering they should be the factions with the most reason to stop the Eveningtide Asura's plans. Exactly what the Eveningtide Asura was planning wasn't clear, but the words of Yod echoed in the back of his mind.

The Corpselord had been convinced someone wanted to blow up the whole Mystic Realm to drain it of its resources, but he'd been convinced the culprit was the foreign empires rather than the Twilight Lord himself. And knowing the ruthless method of cultivation the Eveningtide Asura employed, Zac figured this Mystic Realm wasn't long for the world if he had his way.

The empires were embroiled in this matter as well, and the more Zac learned, the more he understood he had no business getting himself involved. Yet he found himself swimming toward the spot marked on the tracker, using the lush plant life as a means to cover his approach.

He got within a few kilometers of the mark on his tracker, but he still hadn't spotted anything amiss. He got closer and

closer, moving back and forth to get a better vantage. And eventually, he saw it. There was a large pillar embedded in the ground, covered in markings. It was the same color as the ocean itself, and the engravings made it blend in almost perfectly with the seaweed around it, forming a nigh-perfect camouflage.

That wasn't only true for his mundane senses. The energy it emitted was wholly unimpressive, not standing out from the plants in the area at all.

If Zac was just passing by, he probably could have swum a few hundred meters from it without noticing its existence at all. It had to be a disguise. The Eveningtide Asura risked the wrath of the Heavens to enter the trial and find someone to shut that thing off. Perhaps the pillar had arrays hiding the energy it emitted.

The scene was a bit odd, making Zac feel something was amiss. He could simply take out a projectile from his Spatial Ring and destroy it with a lazy throw. Why were there no defenses?

As far as he could tell, the pillar wasn't even protected by a weak barrier, and there were no warriors or defensive golems stationed there either. If this was an integral piece supposed to thwart the Eveningtide Asura, why had it simply been planted and forgotten like this?

Zac scanned the area over and over, using every method available in his repertoire to look for any sort of trap. But there was nothing. Zac swam upward, heading for the surface of the ocean. He risked being exposed this way, but he needed to figure out what the hell was going on.

This odd setup looked harmless enough, yet it managed to keep the whole Twilight Chasm depopulated. There had to be some trick. But there was nothing to see on the surface either except torrential storms and a humongous flying Beast King howling from far off.

He swam back to the depths before he was spotted, and found himself just fifty meters from the array pillar. Part of him wanted to ignore this thing and keep going, but the thinly

veiled threat of the Eveningtide Asura made him grit his teeth and take out [**Verun's Bite**].

A deep growl made the water vibrate as Zac shot forward, the large jagged edge of [**Gorehew**] forming in front of the axe. Thankfully, the Spirit Tool hadn't suddenly become incapable of channeling his undead skills after gaining the golden patterns. If anything, it felt like energy coursed through the weapon smoother compared to before.

Zac was in front of the pillar in no time, but his eyes widened when the seemingly engraved runes across the pillar rearranged themselves with dizzying speed, releasing a tremendous blast that rebuffed his strike and pushed Zac back over twenty meters. The strike came from what looked like a gate made from the runes, and out of it, a densely tattooed man stepped out.

The attacker seemed to be a member of the Havarok Empire, judging by the tattoos covering his body. Zac was filled with a sense of wrongness as he looked into the man's empty eyes. There was no spark of sapience. He reminded Zac of the silver guards of Salvation more than an elite cultivator.

It wasn't strictly a puppet, as Zac could sense the man was alive. However, his energy signature was odd. He neither resembled a living cultivator nor carried the mark of undeath. He rather gave off an aura similar to a creature of the Twilight Ocean, perfectly in tune with the Twilight Energy. Furthermore, even after having observed the odd puppet-man for a few seconds, no contribution points showed up over his head, meaning the System didn't consider the man a trial-taker.

The runes on his body lit up in a dark golden-green, and Zac felt a storm of Twilight Energy gather around him. In an instant, the energy density in the area reached levels that surpassed the outer chasm. If not for his unique constitution, he would have been in big trouble.

Zac looked back and forth between the silent man and the pillar behind him, no longer sure which one was the actual target. The puppet reeked of killing intent, and he shot toward

Zac as energy built in his body. His runes turned almost blinding, and chaotic arcs of something surrounded him.

His first instinct was to call it lightning, but it was fully made by Twilight Energy. It made him think of his experience in the valley, where he'd almost been convinced that Life was not Life, and Death was not Death. They were rather receptacles for something else, like how Twilight had somehow become a receptacle for lightning in the puppet in front of him.

It was an interesting contrast to his own path, but Zac didn't have any time to study it, as the puppet was almost instantaneously upon him. The warrior didn't have any weapons, swiping his hand toward Zac like a beast. Waves of twilight thunder rippled forward, and Zac was shocked at the power the attack contained.

This puppet, had it once been a Ranker of the trial? Zac had a hard time imagining too many being able to unleash such a forceful attack, even if he wasn't restrained by the Twilight Energy in his current state. However, Zac realized the truth of the matter as he sensed a familiar source of power in the cascading wave of destruction.

Life force.

The zombified cultivator was burning his longevity to unleash terrifying amounts of energy on the go, and the whole area groaned under the chaotic might of his attacks. Still, it was nowhere near enough to make Zac feel despair, and he stood in place as a thick coffin sprang up in front of him. It was the skeletons of **[Profane Exponents]** making their appearance, for once not being beset by terrifying currents the second Zac brought them out.

The roiling wave of lightning struck the barrier, and the whole area for almost a hundred meters was turned into a void as the water was forcibly evaporated. Of course, the odd scene only lasted for an instant before the ocean collapsed on itself, causing a storm to erupt.

The crashing ocean itself was cut in two as Zac swung his weapon, its edge radiating the unquestionable might of the

Branch of the War Axe. The lightning storm was unable to last even a moment as the ripping edge of Dao shot forward, its churning chaos nothing in the madness of war.

The energy of the whole area itself roiled, and not from the outbursts of attacks. It was Zac who had unleashed his Dao Field, which was now powerful enough to almost impact the fundamental laws of the area. Even the usually harmonious Twilight Energy was growing erratic, breaking apart in an internal struggle.

The outline of two massive axes appeared behind Zac's back, but they only lasted a fraction of a second before they dissipated and joined the more intangible energy of the overpowering Dao Field. Zac wasted no time as he appeared next to the puppet, the edge of **[Gorehew]** ripping toward him.

The puppet had been pushed off-balance by the Dao Field, and its runes flickered as he held his head in a silent scream. Zac guessed the zombification process wasn't perfect, and the warrior's original path suddenly found itself in a struggle against the one imposed on his body. Ultimately, it didn't matter, and the black edge ripped him clean in two, prompting a surge of energy to enter Zac's body.

Zac looked at the bisected body of the cultivator thoughtfully for a moment before he swam toward the pillar. No wonder the chasm was so empty. If puppets like these were placed all around, few would dare make their move. Its combat strength was nothing to scoff at, and the amount of Twilight Energy it gathered was enough to kill most warriors on its own.

A second swing destroyed the array pillar, but Zac's brows rose in surprise when the engravings on its surface detached from the crumbling rock and turned into glistening sigils hovering in the water itself. The runes re-formed themselves, distorting and elongating until eight vortices formed.

From the Void, eight more figures stepped out, each one of them radiating the same killing intent as their fallen comrade, and the energy density in the area climbed toward unprecedented levels. Zac's first instinct was to book it, but he

swore in surprise when the whole area was sealed by some sort of Twilight Energy lock.

Zac looked back at the eight warriors with a sigh as torrential amounts of Miasma started to churn in his body. It looked like these guys wanted to lock him down, but two could play that game. It was time to try out his new skill.

PILLAR OF DESOLATION

The rampaging Twilight Energy was putting even Zac at a disadvantage, and dangerous amounts stormed into his body despite the latent protection he gained inside the valley. Thankfully, simply using his new-and-improved Dao Field lessened the pressure significantly, which allowed him to finish charging his new skill without having to turn to his Void Energy.

He had figured a Supreme-quality skill would be pretty energy hungry, but he was shocked to find it required 60% of his energy to form, meaning it was impossible to activate solely with his hidden energy reserve. That alone was crazy considering how massive an energy pool his attributes and Draugr heritage provided. Even more shocking was the fact that a small amount of distilled energy of Oblivion was dragged into the skill fractal.

Zac had no time to worry about that, as the skill was ready and it was just in time. The eight puppets seemed to have realized he wasn't exploding from energy overload, and their auras started to accumulate as they no doubt readied themselves to strike. However, they were too late, and the whole area rumbled as it was rapidly swallowed by endless darkness.

He himself was no exception, and he felt himself meld with the nothingness around him. He was one with the domain, and Zac felt he would be able to appear wherever he wished. He could also stay and let his skill do the work for him, which he opted to do. Unsurprisingly, the eight puppets

stopped in their tracks as they tried to find their way in the darkness.

From that darkness, a sole pillar rose from the ground, and even Zac was shocked at the grotesque monument of suffering. Even if he was the one who conjured it. It looked a bit like a totem pole reaching fifty meters into the air, and was completely constituted of statues and reliefs of hundreds of people locked in agony.

Some missed arms or other limbs, while others were maimed to the point of entrails spilling down on their neighbors. A few even held their decapitated heads in an embrace as they were pinned to the pole by thick chains that formed an intricate mesh from top to bottom.

Their wounds were carved with excruciating detail, yet their facial features were indistinct, creating a sense of discordance. But as Zac looked at the figures, the unreadable faces suddenly became all too familiar. It was the faces of those he'd killed on his journey. Thankfully, the effect only lasted an instant before the statues turned back to their previous form.

A few seemed to be struggling against the fetters that bound them while an even smaller group was lost in a fugue of abject hopelessness. However, most of the depicted warriors, especially those placed toward the top, struggled to climb higher. To reach the orb above them.

At the top, a sphere of utmost darkness hovered, an anti-sun radiating true death. Zac could feel that not even an undead would be safe if entering that thing, since there ultimately was an uncrossable line between undeath and true death.

And in the heart of the orb—nothingness. Oblivion.

It was just a small seed, but it was enough to bring true finality to death. Yet, for some reason, the wretched beings seemed desperate to enter, even though they were frozen in place. You could perhaps say the totem pole represented limbo, whereas the orb represented release.

Try as they might, they would never reach that spot, bound as they were by thick fetters of desolation. The orb hovered untouched, drenching the area in its immense aura.

The dark domain it created was different from the darkness that spread from skills like **[Deathmark]** or Varo's obfuscation skills. It was a sealed domain with no escape, and Zac watched with interest as the remaining runes of the pillar cracked, making sure that no other puppets would be teleported to the area.

At the edge of the domain, a river of darkness created a towering wall as impassable as the River Styx itself. Certainly, people could enter if they so wished, but doing so would put them in Zac's kingdom. Here, he was sovereign ruler, the arbiter of fate. Not even Twilight held sway in here, and it was severely weakened by the combination of his Dao domain and the orb exuding supremacy at top of the totem pole.

The zombified warriors worked as one, accurately deducing that the pillar presented a huge threat. Each of them conjured massive waves of energy as they launched their strikes at the base. Some of the attacks were elemental in nature, like the blast of Twilight-touched lightning from the first cultivator to appear.

Others were just chaotic mixes of energy condensed into a lethal storm that tried to tear apart everything they touched. However, not one used a skill. Zac was starting to suspect they weren't able to. Whatever had been done to these people had fused them with the Twilight Ocean, probably at the cost of their original cultivation methods.

Zac sent out a mental command, and eight of the ethereal chains on the totem pole shot out, each targeting a puppet. They entered the chaotic storm of twilight like spears of death, but were swallowed in the tide as the barrage slammed into the totem pole with enough power to almost destroy space itself.

However, the core of **[Pillar of Desolation]** only received superficial damage from the terrifying strike. Some of the statues had cracks running across their bodies while a few of the chains shattered. The chains Zac had sent out were

momentarily dispelled into puffs of darkness, but they reformed after less than a second and were already closer to their targets than they had been before.

The puppets finally displayed some semblance of sapience as they spread out, with four shooting toward the pillar, whereas the others tried to break out of the domain. Those who went on the offense were struck down first. Zac felt a surge of Miasma entering his body as the first of the puppets was caught while the other three desperately dodged.

Just like the old skill [**Profane Seal**], the chains started draining their captives of energy, becoming fodder for Zac to keep fighting. The tattooed warrior furiously struggled as it released one strike after another, but the moment the chain ensnared him, it was like it had transformed from an intangible manifestation of darkness into a physical object.

Suddenly, it was as durable as the totem pole itself, and it barely received a scratch as it dragged the man closer to the pillar. In fact, it was a few of the statues that were pulling on the chain, and Zac almost felt like he could sense a hint of schadenfreude in their blank eyes as they pulled the captive nearer.

A second one of the Zombies was caught soon after, and then a third. They were pretty agile even without access to skills, but many of their advantages were nullified here. Some of their energy-gathering ability was blocked out by the layers of domains, but more importantly, the whole area was under tremendous pressure from the orb in the air.

The old [**Profane Seal**] had a massive fractal that doubled as a gravity array, and that effect was retained in an even more powerful form from the glowing anti-sun. These puppets had tried to take the pillar down, but the closer they got, the more affected they were by the restriction. Soon enough, they became too slow to avoid the chains.

Zac sensed he could activate [**Blighted Cut**] any time he wanted after having caught the first set of puppets, but he wanted to unearth the full effect of the skill now that he'd activated it for the first time. Everything had been so clear

when he'd formed the thousands of patterns that made up this terrifying ability, but it had all become blurred and confused before he completed the process.

Now, things were slowly coming back to him, and he looked with rapt attention as the first of the puppets was dragged onto the pillar by the nearby statues. It struggled and fought, but it was all in vain as the statues enclosed the man in an embrace as the fetters wound them all tighter and tighter.

A pained wail screeched from the puppet, and Zac saw emotion in its eyes for the first time—fear. It only lasted for a fraction of a second before the enormous sphere of death on the top of the pole released a pulse, prompting a wave of darkness to cascade down along the length of the pillar. It passed the spot where the warrior was being held, continuing out through the other chains to deliver a painful surge to the captives.

The darkness passed, and the puppet bound to the pillar was gone, replaced with yet another statue locked in an eternal struggle. Meanwhile, it looked like the totem pole had grown a bit taller, and the sphere at the top had grown slightly more oppressive.

The other half of the puppets were still trying to break out of the prison Zac conjured, but the river swirling at the edge of the cage was as impassable as his old skill. Even more so. Zac could feel how their monumental attacks were disrupting the churning water, but it wasn't enough. It was an ever-changing blockage, and Zac sensed how the cracks in his skill were swiftly moved away, replaced by other sections of the river.

Breaking out was possible, but you would either need to be able to unleash a terrifying strike to split apart the river in one go, sort of like Billy's titanic smashes that could break apart almost any array. If that wasn't an option, you'd need extremely keen senses or good scouting skills so that you could keep track of the damage you caused.

The second option was easier said than done even with the capability, since **[Pillar of Desolation]** wasn't the only skill Zac would have going in a situation like this. Activating

another skill would force him out of hiding, but Zac didn't care as he silently appeared at the edge of the cage, far away from his targets.

One spectral wraith after another appeared as Zac activated **[Deathmark]**, and he smiled with satisfaction as the wraiths looked more corporeal than usual. It was no doubt thanks to the orb of budding Oblivion shining down. While it suppressed the interlopers in this domain, it also helped Zac's summons.

He didn't feel any boost to himself, but that was perhaps because he wasn't a conjuration of death like the axe-wielding wraiths. They didn't seem much stronger, though they would last longer and be able to withstand more punishment before dissipating.

Soon enough, three more puppets were caught by the chains of death. Two of them were inexorably dragged toward the pole, but one managed to resist. It was an extremely bulky warrior who probably had Strength as his main attribute who managed to resist the pull. He'd dug his feet into the ground, and his limbs bulged as he released a torrent of energy to withstand the fetters and even topple the pillar itself.

However, the stalemate only lasted a second before a wraith flashed over, its axe separating the man's head from his torso with an emotionless swing imbued with the Branch of the War Axe. He was dragged along with the others, joining the statues on the pole.

Zac felt a pang of danger as the two surviving warriors shot toward him, their auras rising to unprecedented levels. Zac had been in this very situation more than once before, and the small skeletal warriors of **[Profane Exponents]** appeared behind him, just in time to form a thick barrier to seal him off.

The next moment, the cage wildly shuddered as the two puppets self-detonated, creating a terrifying explosion of Twilight Energy. The barriers Zac had hastily erected were only enough to block the destruction for a second, but that was enough for Zac to activate and flash away with **[Abyssal Phase]**.

The rumbling subsided, and Zac deactivated all his skills. The real Twilight Ocean soon came crashing back, no longer held at bay by his deathly river, and Zac looked at the desolation around him with a satisfied smile. Two deep craters had been left in the ground after the puppets self-destructed, but Zac was more interested in the small spot of frayed space that lingered at the area where the core of the anti-sun had once been.

It was a crackling black glob that shuddered as it was rooted in place, looking a bit similar to a spatial tear, yet decidedly different. Almost like a frayed thread on a sweater, and if Zac pulled on the thread, it would lead into the true Abyss. Zac obviously wouldn't do such a thing, opting to set off after confirming he'd progressed the quest and that there was no loot to pick up.

The lack of Spatial Treasures was disappointing, but the quest progress was higher than expected. In fact, it had reached (9/729). It mostly confirmed it was those odd Havarok cultivators who were considered the jammers, rather than the array pillar itself. There were probably a lot of them lurking around the rim of the chasm, and what he'd seen so far didn't give Zac reason to believe finishing the quest to be overly difficult.

The preparations of the Havarok might have been enough to thwart most people, since most would be lucky if they could even stay alive in front of the energy density the puppets conjured. Zac wagered that only he and Uona would have the ability to trash those things as they came.

Even then, Zac didn't start swimming along the edge of the array in search of the next pillar, and neither did he wait for another batch of puppets to come looking for him. He kept going straight ahead, moving away from the chasm. Destroying the pillar was simply a precaution, a way for him to display some progress in case the Eveningtide Asura had some hidden traps in case he completely disregarded the quest.

But there was no way he was actually going to keep breaking open those jammers.

A [**Perennial Vastness Token**] was nice and all, but you needed to be alive to enjoy it. This was a decree quest, and he would have to physically head over to the Eveningtide Asura or an assigned representative to cash in. The chance of him surviving such an exchange was worse than slim.

Getting a decree quest would normally be a dream come true for most wandering cultivators, since getting one was the quickest way to add a teleportation array to your private teleportation system. Just being able to travel back and forth between Twilight Harbor and some other world in the Zervereth Sector would allow you to make a great living as a porter.

But that was for normal cultivators and normal times. It wasn't even a given that Twilight Harbor would exist in a few decades if Alvod Jondir had his way, so what good was teleportation access? And even if the harbor survived, would Zac dare return to this place after the ruckus he caused?

Why make an enemy of the Havarok Empire for a reward you'd never get to enjoy? If anything, the more of the jammers that stayed intact, the better. That way, the Eveningtide Asura was more likely to have his hands full while Zac fled back to the Zecia Sector in his human form, never to be seen again.

Zac even wished he was a bit more talented like his sister. If he was, he might have figured out a way to seal up the chasm even better. For now, creating some chaos would have to do.

THE SPIDER AND THE FLY

Zac had been too reactive until now, dealing with things as they came. He had to start making some moves on his own or he'd eventually get trapped in someone's schemes. Be it the Eveningtide Asura or the large factions. He needed to be the spider rather than the fly stuck in the web, and that feeling had been part of the motivation behind the formation of his new skill.

And it was with that conviction he needed to push forward through this trial, no longer staying passive. First was to get away from here. He'd noticed a weak shimmer in the water when he destroyed the pillar, like a spiderweb burning up, and he guessed that whatever array the Havarok erected had broken down in his section. He made use of that fact as he left the chasm behind, heading in the general direction of the Death Pulse.

The most pressing issue was that his **[Ocean Chart]** was completely blank in this area, and he wasn't really in a mood to waste more time than necessary. He was running behind schedule because of his extended cultivation session, and he was already a couple of months late to his rendezvous with Catheya.

Zac definitely couldn't get caught in some sort of trial or danger zone, wasting what precious time he had. He needed to catch someone and borrow their map, preferably gaining the route back to the middle reaches of the Twilight Ocean in one fell swoop. Unfortunately, the puppet-like cultivators hadn't even had a Cosmos Sack, let alone an **[Ocean Chart]**.

Furthermore, the ocean remained oddly desolate, with no cultivators in sight even after traveling for two hours. It almost started to feel like he'd been thrown into an empty dimension. That, or he'd lost track of time and stayed beyond the closing of the trial. Thankfully, it didn't take much longer until Zac found his first clue.

A massive rune illuminated the ocean far in the distance, just beneath the surface. This wasn't an array like he'd seen before, but rather a marker similar to the one Ventus used for his settlement in the Greengrove Archipelago. This one said "Warning!" in the Multiverse general script rather than indicating a gathering spot.

Zac hesitated before he changed course, heading straight for the marker. It was definitely worth the risk if he could get some answers. Finally, he saw the source of the glowing sign: an inscribed block of stone with hundreds of grooves. In each groove, an information crystal was embedded, waiting for whomever to pick one like a flyer. Some of the crystals shone with a golden luster, whereas others glowed with the cold turquoise of Miasma.

It was hard to tell whether the block of stone had hidden arrays, so he had **[Love's Bond]** stretch through the vegetation he hid in and continue for hundreds of meters beneath the ground until it sprang up like a snake right in front of the marker. The fetters snatched one of each crystal before pulling back to where Zac waited.

He picked up the crystals before he flashed away, furiously swimming for thirty minutes before stopping. It was a small precaution in case the thing was a trap, and only after erecting a series of isolation arrays did he infuse some Miasma into the turquoise gemstone, which was a High-quality information crystal.

A large screen appeared in front of him, showing a large group of cultivators. Standing before them was a burly cultivator standing as tall as Billy, with a massive sword draped across his back. He radiated an extremely ferocious aura, to the point it could be sensed through the screen. Of

course, Zac recognized the man since he was extensively covered in every information missive he owned.

‘I am Aldus Venarun, and I have a matter of grave importance to share with all the undead factions of Twilight Harbor, along with our friends among the wandering cultivators.’

Zac was a bit surprised. Going by the odd tattooed cultivators and the array flag before, Zac expected to see Ykrodas Havarok. But this notice was made by a local rather than an outsider. Zac calmly kept listening, though he never stopped scanning the area for any sort of threat closing in on him.

‘Enemies of Twilight Harbor are scheming to bring harm upon it. A few shortsighted families from the Undead Empire along with the Radiant Temple are bent on collapsing the Twilight Ocean upon itself, stealing its essence. We cannot allow this to happen. It would spell doom for our homes and true death for trillions. Everyone needs to do their part in protecting our homeland.’

The scene changed, and Zac’s eyes widened when he saw it was a short clip of the enormous snake that had almost killed him in the depths of the Twilight Chasm. The clip was short, only showing the beast’s head from a distance for an instant before a wave of destruction rippled toward the source of the video. It didn’t take a genius to figure out that whoever filmed that clip was no longer of this world.

‘The Twilight Lord is fighting for our survival,’ Aldus said as the projection swapped back to him. ‘He is risking his life by bending the rules, sending a guardian to seal off the chasm. It is the heart of this ocean and the lifeline of the harbor, which makes it one of the targets of our enemies. The council and our allies have worked together to aid the Twilight Lord’s efforts by setting up a vast tracking array.’

‘We have cordoned off the whole Twilight Chasm, and anyone entering will become an enemy of the council. Even if the Twilight Lord’s guardian doesn’t manage to strike you down, we will hunt you with everything we have. You might

think it unfair, but this is a matter of life and death. So please, turn back, and look for opportunities elsewhere. If you wish to join our cause, you can do so at any one of our stations.'

The projection changed again, showing several locations on a surprisingly detailed map. Zac hurriedly copied it, adding vast swathes to his **[Ocean Chart]** in one go. By the time Zac was done, the projection had died down, and the area was silent.

Just to make sure, Zac took out a Divine Crystal. Absorbing its energy was akin to poisoning himself in his Draugr form, but he only siphoned a small chunk before infusing it along with his Fragment of the Bodhi into the life-attuned information crystal. The message was the same, except presented by a treant even more powerful than Yanub Mettleleaf.

Zac looked around, and while the area was empty, he still activated another escape talisman, disappearing in a puff of smoke. He appeared among some fifty-meter-tall corals a moment later, startling a school of crabs that were busy picking apart a massive eel. A short but frenzied battle later, Zac shot away through the reef, his Spatial Ring filled with a small mountain of High-quality crab meat. He didn't travel too far, stopping at a secluded spot to go over the information.

He finally understood why there were so few people in the area at least. The tracking array was a pretty strong deterrent, and Zac had experienced their methods himself, with the powerful puppets appearing out of nowhere. He guessed that anyone who passed through those runes would be branded, becoming a beacon for teleporting puppets.

And even if someone managed to pass through that outer layer of defense, there was still that terrifying snake to worry about. Zac wondered just what happened while he was secluded in cultivation for eight months. Was that snake really guarding the Twilight Chasm? If so, why? Was it simply to prevent any more accidents from happening?

Zac was definitely suspicious about how the information was framed. From what Zac had gathered, the council and the

Eveningtide Asura shouldn't be on the same side. Alvod was using this Mystic Realm for his cultivation, draining it like he'd done with so many worlds before. It was more likely that Aldus Venarun and the treant had simply reframed the clip to suit their purposes when the snake was doing something else entirely.

He was pretty surprised the undead clan with some Izh'Rak Reaver heritage had taken up with the Havarok Empire, but it ultimately didn't matter much to Zac's purposes. The chart the crystals provided was far more useful. It mapped out seven towns and their surroundings, the closest one being just over a week's travel away. There was another one in the inner reaches, though it wasn't located in the direction Zac left the chasm.

The rest of the towns were located in the middle and early sections of the ocean, too far for Zac to reach anytime soon. Unfortunately, it didn't show any indication of where the Death Pulse was located, so Zac reluctantly steered toward the closest settlement. He figured he could catch someone there, finally getting an update of the state of the trial, hopefully an update that didn't take such liberties with the truth.

The days passed as Zac traversed the core region of the Twilight Ocean. This area was just one huge reef forest with massive corals that shone in all colors of the rainbow, making the experience almost psychedelic. He tried traveling in a submersible to avoid prying eyes, but he lost it to a Beast King's sneak attack after just one hour. He'd ultimately been forced to travel the normal way, not wanting to lose any more of his ships.

The deathly silence of the Twilight Chasm didn't reach this area, and it seemed every single coral was home to some powerful beast or deadly plant. Even when exuding a blood-drenched aura that marked him as a tough nut to crack, Zac found himself mired in dozens of battles over the next three days.

While this place was a ruthless place where only the strong could survive, it was also a place full of opportunities. Every time he was attacked by a beast at the precipice of reaching D-

grade, Zac could almost be sure he'd find a valuable treasure in their den. Certainly, none of the items were anywhere close to the dumplings or the soul-nurturing grass he found in the depths of the Twilight Chasm, but some would still be considered rare treasures if presented at an auction back in the Zecia Sector.

On the fourth day, just as Zac was in the middle of looting the den of an overconfident mollusk monster, he felt his chest thump, but it wasn't his heart that beat at the prospect of treasure. It was **[Void Heart]**, which was finally waking up after a month-long comatose state. He barely had time to seal the cave with a series of arrays before the hidden node beat again, and Zac hurriedly sat down as he was beset by a storm of lightning.

It was clear his E-grade hidden node was incapable of completely refining Heavenly Lightning, and Zac screamed with pain as rippling currents coursed through his body, setting his world ablaze. Thankfully, he could feel the lightning had been somewhat changed, and it didn't have the presence of the Heavens themselves, that ancient fury intent on killing those who walked the Boundless Path.

Zac's whole body twitched as more and more lightning was released by his node, and soon enough, his whole soul aperture was beset by a calamitous storm. Thousands of lightning bolts struck at the ocean, and his Soul Core was almost like a lightning rod that was constantly targeted.

However, while he was filled with agony, Zac didn't really lament the situation. Trauma was generally just trauma, but suffering sometimes had a silver lining. His whole body was spasmodically twitching on the ground, but he could feel how his cells were greedily swallowing the lightning, almost as quickly as **[Void Heart]** was spitting it out.

As to where it went, Zac wasn't sure. He assumed it was the same place as all the other treasures he swallowed when evolving his bloodline. Not only that, but Zac's soul was being refined by the continuous lightning strikes. The process continued for over twenty minutes, and Zac shakily got back into a sitting position. His hair was singed and standing

straight out, and he smelled like a roasted pig, but he was filled with excitement as he started to check on his condition.

The most palpable change was his bloodline talent—**[Force of the Void]**. Until now, it had held 32% of his normal energy reserves, but that number had been pushed up to 38% in one go. It was just 6% more, but it was an amazing step forward considering he'd barely progressed that much after years of absorbing energy back on Earth.

His cells had long felt like billions of small black holes drawing energy to the Void, and it seemed these small vortices had been slightly expanded by the tribulation lightning. Even better, some of the nigh-impossible-to-remove gunk from the **[Chainbreaking Pills]** had been singed clean from his nodes, saving him well over a month of work.

This was great news considering this was just one of the tribulations he would have to endure in the E-grade. With his path being formalized and pointing toward the Boundless, the System wouldn't protect him against the Heavens when forming his three branches, even if the Branch of the War Axe technically was within the System's purview.

If anything, the minor tribulations that would hit him for his other two branches might be even more powerful considering they were part of a strictly Boundless Peak. Zac figured the Heavens could zap him every month if it meant getting these kinds of rewards.

His soul had improved as well, but it wasn't as palpable as the situation with his bloodline talent. The shimmering core in his soul aperture hadn't grown bigger or denser, but Zac felt its luster was purer. Most likely, the lightning had zapped some of the impurities from it.

The Soul Core had been almost completely pure after performing his first reincarnation, but much had happened since then. For one, the energy of Oblivion kept pouring into the core, nurturing it while leaving a bit of its mark behind. Most of the accumulated impurities were ultimately that grass he chewed raw for months down in the chasm.

That Spiritual Herb had been extremely pure, but each stalk no doubt left some impurities behind. And after eating almost a hundred, there were bound to be some detriments along with the benefits. Unfortunately, the **[Purity of the Void]** only dealt with the impurities in his body, leaving his soul aperture untouched.

This boon, while not useful in the short run, was bound to help with his second reincarnation in the future. Apart from that, the two oceans seemed energized, but Zac couldn't pinpoint exactly what the change stemmed from. Zac kept scanning his body for another couple of minutes, but there wasn't anything else to find.

His attributes were the same, and he didn't feel any change or improvements to his Dao, unfortunately. Still, it was far better than what most could expect. For a boundless cultivator, simply surviving the punishment was all the benefit you could expect. And most were left bedridden for months, sometimes years, after getting blasted by the Heavenly Lightning.

Having unearthed all the benefits he could, Zac soon set out through the vast reef, this time looking for treasure with even greater fervor. The tribulation lightning had blasted away a lot of his impurities, making this a prime opportunity to stuff himself with treasure. Who knew, he might encounter another sudden bout of inspiration that would allow him to form a second branch.

It would be a huge waste if he hadn't accumulated a bunch of impurities that he could power-wash out of his system by that time.

That was why Zac's eyes lit up when he saw a harried figure swimming through the reef, and he quickly masked his aura as he crept closer. The creature in question was a weird eighty-meter-long monstrosity that looked like a mix of a turtle and an alligator. The result was a Beast King with a spiked shell on its back and massive jaws with three rows of sharp teeth.

It was a creature bred for war, evidenced by the fact that it actually had another Beast King in its maw: a forty-meter-long

fish that still released an ominous aura even in death. However, that in itself was Zac's opportunity, since the victor hadn't come out of the battle unscathed.

A large crack ran across the spiked shell on the Beast King's back, and it had multiple deep wounds across its body. Its aura was a bit unstable as well, and Zac guessed it was rushing back to its den to nurture its wounds. If that thing had been in perfect condition, Zac wouldn't have wasted his breath.

He might have been able to take it down even if it was a lot stronger than the Beast Kings he had fought in direct battle so far, but it might have forced him to use the energy of the Remnants to win. Now, the situation was different, and any treasure an apex predator like this kept in its den would have to be pretty impressive.

Zac had his goals, but a small detour shouldn't change the situation too much. He started to follow in the Beast King's wake, making sure he wasn't discovered, and the thrill of the hunt and the promise of treasure made adrenaline course through his veins.

REEF FOREST

Zac panted deeply for a few seconds before he ripped the edge of [Verun's Bite] from the brain stem of the beast. Afterward, he quickly swam up, escaping the gory soup inside the Beast King's skull. All around him, the massive den was in shambles, the walls completely unable to withstand the fury of their clash.

The original plan had been to ambush and take the wounded beast down in one go, but plans could only take you so far. The initial surprise came when the beast reached its den, an enormous chasm that continued thousands of meters into the ground. Zac had been shocked to find that its aura had simply disappeared just a minute after entering.

It was like it teleported away, without giving the slightest hint of what it was about to do. Zac first thought it was unusually good at restraining its aura, but that didn't completely explain the situation. There had to be *something* inside, be it a powerful Nexus Vein, a unique herb, or even some mysterious metal whose aura would allow the Beast King to gradually refine their bloodline.

But there was nothing like that. Conversely, the energy hadn't decreased like it did around the small chamber that had become his cultivation cave down in the depths. The energy the hole emitted was exactly the same as the ambient energy, making Zac guess something else was at play.

Either there was an array hiding what was going on inside or a unique material with obscuring capabilities. In either case, it piqued Zac's interest, and he'd slowly made his way inside

after waiting another twenty minutes to let the Beast King lower its guard. Unfortunately, it had been futile, and Zac had almost gotten himself killed by a terrifying energy beam that engulfed the whole entrance when he entered.

If not for his danger sense and activating [**Abyssal Phase**] with the help of his bloodline, he would have been severely burned. He managed to dodge completely unscathed, which left the wounded Beast King in an awkward situation, considering using an attack of such magnitude had considerably worsened its wounds.

The battle turned into a ruthless melee afterward, where Zac eventually managed to create an opportunity with the help of the finishing strike of [**Blighted Cut**], which opened a large enough wound in its skull for Zac to sneak inside. From there, a rampage inside its brain had given the king of the reef a gruesome but quick death.

He'd ultimately been forced to use [**Pillar of Desolation**] again even though he planned on doing without. The chains of [**Love's Bond**] simply weren't strong enough to trap such a strong Beast King, even in its wounded state. Just trying would damage the chains, which in turn would harm Alea.

It was a useful experiment though, since it was a confirmation that he could only attach one chain to such a massive creature. The chain had wound itself over ten times around the beast, and managed to endure just long enough for him to unleash [**Blighted Cut**]. However, he knew that even his ultimate skill wouldn't have lasted against a Beast King for too long.

In either case, the hunt was a success, which meant it was time to loot. The beast was chopped up into manageable chunks, though Zac could quickly confirm that its meat most likely wasn't serviceable. It had a rank odor not fit for eating, but it would still be useful as feed or a lure for other beasts.

As for the den itself, it was covered in Twilight Crystals, though most had been broken during the clash. Unsurprisingly, the energy intensity inside the den was far greater compared to the outside, in this case, thanks to sitting on a Nexus Vein.

Unfortunately, it looked like the treasure this beast had found for itself was a natural formation rather than an item, making it impossible for Zac to take.

He'd sensed a mysterious energy being generated in the center of the cave, but that energy was gone by the time the fight was over. That didn't mean his hunt was fruitless, and his eyes first turned to the small hill of corpses in the corner and then the mound of Twilight Crystals in another.

It looked extremely grim, but Zac still shot toward the pile to rummage for wealth among the fallen cultivators. There were almost a hundred corpses gathered, and judging by the state of decomposition, this beast had preyed on trial-takers for at least ten E-grade trials. For all Zac knew, this bloodthirsty bastard might have been a known terror of the area.

Zac only briefly scanned some of the rings and pouches, but most of the pouches had been broken down by the Twilight Energy, their contents forever lost to the Void. Thankfully, the Spatial Rings were more resilient, and while many had lost a lot of their space, what remained contained an impressive number of treasures.

Those who had fallen were mostly native elites from the looks of it, while Zac guessed seven of the identifiable corpses came from the three B-grade factions. Even then, the items were almost exclusively treasures found in the ocean or the preparations they'd brought for the trial itself. The imperials didn't have a single skill crystal or cultivation manual inside their rings.

Finally, there was the odd crystal mountain hidden in a secured corner of the cave. Throughout the whole battle, the beast had kept away from that side, and Zac curiously looked at the skeleton sitting on the mound of Twilight Crystals. After having encountered something similar once before, Zac confirmed this set of bones had once belonged to a Hegemon. This one probably much stronger than the other skeleton he still carried in his Spatial Ring.

Its bones shone like polished metal, and they exuded a palpable pressure as Zac swam closer. Zac wondered why the

Beast King would accord this long-dead cultivator such respect, but after some time he believed he found the reason. It was not the skeleton itself, but rather the item on its wrist and the benefit it provided.

It was the bracer the fallen Hegemon carried that hid the aura of the cave, rather than the natural formation or the Beast King itself. To accomplish that, it was constantly drawing energy from the thousands of crystals beneath, and Zac guessed it was the beast that figured out how it worked and supplied the crystals.

The thing seemed able to block out the aura of anything that entered this cave. It had a mesmerizing blue luster, and Zac could vaguely spot what looked like a rune deep inside. The craftsmanship of the metal bracer that held the sapphire-like gemstone was absolutely exquisite, and the treasure reminded Zac of his **[Stone of Hope]**.

He hesitated only for a moment before he put it on his left wrist just like the skeleton had, and the change was immediate. Whatever field the gemstone emitted was drawn in, only covering his body. Zac tried infusing it with some Miasma to see if he could make it spread its protection to a wider area, but his energy was rebuffed.

Zac furrowed his brows a bit as he glanced at the mound of crystals beneath the skeleton, and guessed the item wasn't made for the undead. That was fine with him though. This effect alone was a great get. Anyone could restrain their aura, but there was always some of it leaking out.

Besides, anyone using scout abilities would see the energy inside his body just like he did with **[Cosmic Gaze]** no matter how skilled at energy control you were.

This treasure would hopefully allow him to traverse unseen, just like the array pillar of the Havarok had almost perfectly blended in with the surroundings. He doubted it would be able to hide the bounty that would appear above his head, but he also knew that thing only showed up when he was focused on.

He spent a few more minutes storing the skeleton and crystal mountain before scavenging the cave for any more treasures. The Beast King was pretty organized, as far as turtle monsters went. Most of the corpses and treasures had been dragged to the same alcove, except the D-grade skeleton, which had been placed in its own section. Seeing as there was nothing else of interest, Zac left, setting course for the settlement indicated on his **[Ocean Chart]**.

It took him another five days to pass the vast coral reef, even if his new bracer saved him a lot of headaches. As long as he kept it running, he was ignored by most of the animals that made the reef their home, even if he was spotted. They probably figured that eating something that didn't emit a speck of energy was a waste of time. Why fill their bellies with trash when they could gobble up something far more palatable?

Some beasts tried to rip him apart out of spite, but most let down their guards. Killing such a weak being didn't warrant any effort. They were quickly proven wrong as Zac bisected them with a lazy swing of his own, adding their carcasses to his rapidly growing stockpile of High-grade meat.

These fights quickly showed the limits of the bracer. It only worked while Zac didn't emit too much energy himself. The moment he unleashed a skill, the effect was broken, and the beasts around him could suddenly sense his aura. And it was a bit troublesome to keep going, seeing as it required non-Miasmic energy to function.

Without anything to feed it, the sapphire lost its luster after around an hour. Zac fashioned a makeshift solution by securing a Supreme Twilight Crystal to it, though he suspected he wouldn't need something like that in his human form.

Having the crystal against his skin led to more Twilight Energy entering his body, but it was a small price to pay as he crept closer to the gathering point the information missive had shared. He was still half a day away from the settlement, but a sudden outburst of energy followed by massive explosions made him stop in his tracks and quickly take cover.

It didn't seem like beasts fighting going by the energy signatures, and Zac cautiously crept closer until he spotted the source. It was over a dozen cultivators. Seeing them filled Zac with an odd sense of relief. He hadn't seen a single soul for almost a year, to the point he was starting to doubt his sanity a little bit. He really hadn't been left behind, forgotten in this cursed ocean.

Zac receded into the shadows before he was spotted. The group of cultivators was fighting against a school of fish that had made a large beehive-like coral their home. The group was made up of six Elementals and nine undead, Revenant natives by the looks of it. Two had bounties at [2,500–5,000], indicating they most likely possessed Dao Branches.

Zac wanted information, but taking on a group of fifteen elites was overdoing it. More to the point, Zac wasn't certain locals knew the answers to his questions, and their allegiances were a lot harder to guess. That party might just be a band of strong cultivators looking for opportunities together, or they might be agents of some of the foreign factions.

For all he knew, there could be spies for all the major forces in that group, considering their average strength.

He rather hoped he could stumble upon members of either the Radiant Temple or the Havarok Empire. Some imperial clan of the Undead Empire would be fine too, but there wasn't a high chance of that happening. From the looks of it, there didn't seem to be many of them around, with the notable exceptions of Uona and the Eidolon scion, whose activities were still a mystery.

In fact, he and Catheya might very well be the only true pureblood Draugr inside the trial. Not a single scion from the nearby Draugr-led kingdom was participating, and Catheya's clan had apparently sold most of their slots to others rather than use them themselves. In contrast, the Havarok Empire had thousands of cultivators entering, and the Radiant Temple had multiple squads as well.

That by itself was some sort of clue to his questions. But exactly what it meant, Zac didn't know.

Zac left the group of cultivators to their devices, aiming for a group of easier targets to digest. Preferably, he'd like to find and catch a lone explorer, but he didn't know if there were too many of those this deep into the ocean. The hours passed as Zac crept through the forest, dodging one group after another. He didn't go any closer to the settlement, rather opting to find cultivators at the reef's edge.

He had been extremely close to pulling the trigger on a group of four human cultivators, but he'd been rudely interrupted just as he was about to close in on them. Another set of cultivators shot closer, clearly intent on robbing the quartet. Zac was forced to creep back into the shadows, swearing at the group of ten opportunists ruining his good fortune.

But finally, eight hours after encountering the first squad, Zac found his perfect opportunity. A sudden light of life flickered between two corals. Zac first thought his eyes were playing tricks on him. But what he was seeing was real. His Draugr eyes were seeing the outline of a humanoid from the life force it exuded, but his other senses couldn't spot a thing.

Someone was traveling alone, using some sort of skill or treasure to hide both their aura and appearance. Luckily, they couldn't fool his special sight that was almost like heat-seeking vision. A smile spread across Zac's face as he activated [**Abyssal Phase**]. The world was reduced to a crawl as he shot forward, rapidly closing in on the target.

The runner only noticed something was wrong just as Zac appeared right behind them, and by that point, it was much too late. Zac turned back into his corporeal form right next to the invisible target, and his hand flashed forward along with four unbreakable chains. As expected, the target didn't have an actual shield running, and he felt his fingers close in on a throat as they slammed into a coral with enough force to topple it.

A pained scream echoed out, but no beast dared come close as Zac unleashed his Dao Field and empowered it with a storm of extra Dao from his [**Spiritual Void**] and his immense killing intent. It was like the area had become a war zone, and

Zac could almost hear the screams of desperate warriors clamoring as his eyes bored into those of his captive.

He couldn't believe his luck when he saw that it was a Havarok cultivator sporting pretty serious wounds. The injuries didn't come from him bum-rushing the poor man, but appeared to be from a previous battle. The cultivator had been fleeing toward the settlement from the depths of the reef, so Zac guessed something had gone awry in there.

It wasn't a surprise. Zac himself could fight freely in these waters, but most cultivators would be pressed to exhibit even 20–30% of their strength. Entering a place with multiple Beast Kings roaming was to dance with death, and Zac guessed the rest of this man's party had become food for the wildlife.

The cultivator looked completely discombobulated before his gaze met Zac's, and his eyes widened with comprehension.

"It's you!" he croaked with a strained voice.

Zac only smiled in return as he took out a sharp needle, which he unceremoniously stabbed into the man's throat. It was a paralyzing agent locking him in place. Zac would have preferred to seal his cultivation altogether, but he figured the environment would kill the poor man if that happened. And that wouldn't do with the plans Zac had.

"I guess I'm easy to recognize," Zac said, smiling as he removed his grip. Of course, he kept the Havarok agent locked in his chains, and he moved the edge of **[Verun's Bite]** to the man's throat to discourage any hasty actions. "In a sense, we're fated. I was just looking for someone from your empire, and here you are, delivering yourself to me. Answer my questions, and I'll let you go."

The cultivator shuddered, but a sense of calm appeared in his eyes as he stopped struggling.

"Like I'd trust an abyssal fiend like you," the man grunted. "Just kill me. I will never betray the empire."

"Now don't be like that," Zac snorted. "Believe it or not, our interests are more aligned than you would think. In fact, I need you to send a message to your prince after this. I failed to

kill off that bloodsucker the last time we fought, but if Prince Ykrodas is interested, we might be able to finish the job together.”

RETURN

“It was you who maimed that lunatic!” the man exclaimed with surprise, but he quickly regained his composure. “Do you take our lord for a fool? Teaming up with an imperial to fight an imperial? What a joke.”

“You should understand the hidden conflicts beneath the surface of the Undead Empire are far greater than the small skirmishes with random factions here on the frontier,” Zac snorted. “In either case, I don’t need you to decide anything on your own. I just need you to relay my message.”

Of course, what Zac wouldn’t tell his captive was that the man’s conclusion was spot on, except for the part about both him and Uona being imperials. He had no real intention of teaming up with Ykrodas Havarok to take out Uona, at least not if he had anything to say about it. As far as he was concerned, those two could play their deadly games while he picked up the Remnants and got the hell out here.

At the same time, if there was something he’d learned over the past five years, it was that the System had a fondness for throwing lethal challenges at him. Zac still wasn’t sure whether it was a result of his abnormally high Luck or because of his bloodline, but the fact was that trouble kept finding him one way or another.

Considering Uona was as troublesome as they came, it seemed prudent to try to make small preparations. Uona should also be one of the biggest thorns in Ykrodas Havarok’s plans, no matter if it came to the contribution ladder or the

larger schemes at play. If it came to blows, this simple message might provide a lifeline.

“I will recount this meeting in full if given the chance,” the man said after some hesitation.

“Good. I need some information, so let’s get some things out of the way. I know there’s a large-scale conflict taking place, where the Havarok Empire is on one side, and the Twilight Lord is on the other. Of course, the Twilight Lord is rather the human cultivator known as Alvod Jondir, or the Eveningtide Asura,” Zac grunted, and he was elated to note there was no surprise on the captive’s face.

It was finally time to get to the bottom of things.

“Our goal is to thwart the plans of the Eveningtide Asura, just as you said,” the scout said after some hesitation. “But I don’t know the exact plans, and even if I did, I wouldn’t tell you. My squad was only stationed here to keep the area stabilized. We set out three days ago to investigate an aberration, but we ran into a mishap, leaving only me behind.”

Zac had a pretty good idea of what that aberration was, but he ignored it and pushed on.

“Why is your faction bothering with this matter? From what I’m told, Alvod is just a wandering Monarch from a frontier sector,” Zac asked.

“He caused unimaginable losses to our empire a long time ago. He even killed one of our ancestral princes,” he said with fury in his eyes. “Now he wants to sacrifice one of our main commercial nodes of the frontier to defend his Dao and achieve Autarchy? We will never abide!”

Zac inwardly shuddered. The situation was really as he had feared. He figured the situation was bigger than Alvod simply wanting to evolve a Dao or something similar, and this proved it. Having an Autarch being pissed off at you was not a great way to live, and it only doubled Zac’s desire not to get too bogged down in this mess.

“Well, taking that step here in the frontier... You might not need to do anything to get your wish.” Zac shrugged as he

feigned disinterest. “More importantly, where is everyone? I left seclusion a month ago, only to find the chasm is sealed off and no elites in sight.”

“We’ve sealed it off,” the man said. “Most wouldn’t dare enter.”

“I doubt Uona or the Rankers would care about that message of yours,” Zac said, opting to forgo divulging his deeds with the pillar. “I could easily make it through that array of yours if I wanted to.”

Zac had a strong suspicion this man’s wretched state was related to Zac’s actions at the chasm, so he massaged the truth a bit. Admitting he was the reason his captives had been killed would put a real damper on the conversation, and there was still much he needed to figure out.

“We have our means,” the scout said, gaze suspicious. Zac could sense the man’s aura fluctuate a bit, but it looked like the soldier reluctantly dropped the matter. “Most have left for the inheritance.”

“The what?” Zac asked with confusion.

“An ancient city appeared in the middle reaches of the ocean three months ago. It’s still sealed off, from what I’ve heard, but people are flooding there from all over the trial in hopes that it’ll open,” the man said with yearning in his eyes. “Some believe it will automatically open its gates at a set time. Others believe enough warriors need to gather before the trial starts.”

“Ancient city? Trial within a trial? What?” Zac muttered, not having expected this piece of news at all. “I’ve never heard about something like that.”

“Neither have the natives, but many believe it’s a unique inheritance of the trial. Perhaps something left behind from before this realm was created.”

“It rather sounds like a trap,” Zac said skeptically. “Is it something the Radiant Temple or the natives have set up?”

“We... believe it might be something Alvod Jondir has dragged from the depths to distract us, but we might be wrong.”

Uona Noz'Valadir has been spotted in the vicinity, as have most of the Rankers," the man said. "But something of that scale, we doubt E-grade warriors can conjure such a thing unless someone has been working toward it for dozens of trials."

"Another complication, just what I need," Zac muttered.

Zac kept questioning the man about the general state of affairs of the trial for a while longer. Thankfully, the Havarok soldier, who was named Trakodles, was more than willing to rat on any faction except his own, especially the Radiant Temple. After just a few minutes, Zac knew more about that faction than after meeting Ventus Kalavan.

He also added Trakodles' charted territories to his own **[Ocean Chart]**, massively expanding his map.

"Alright," Zac eventually said. "As I said, I am willing to work together with your leader to take down Uona Noz'Valadir. The stage has been set, and an opportunity to discuss this further will present itself at the gates of that city. Until then, I hope we can stay out of each other's way. I know Ykrodas might be eyeing my bounty, but I urge him to remember his mission unless he is prepared to lose everything. Now, it's time for you to take a nap."

"What?" Trakodles blurted, only to have a pill shoved into his mouth.

Trakodles' eyes rolled up into his head as Zac started to push the man deeper and deeper into the soil. He stopped at thirty meters beneath the surface, after which he surrounded the warrior in Supreme Divine Crystals and an illusion array.

The crystals would absorb some of the energy from the surroundings, helping combat the atmosphere. The array wasn't really for the man's protection, but rather for him to be a bit harder to locate. He'd almost missed it, but Trakodles had sent out some sort of signal by cracking a talisman the moment they crashed into the coral reef.

Zac only pretended not to notice in hopes that his captive would keep talking in an attempt to delay. Backup was no

doubt on their way, though it would take them a few hours to reach this place. With his preparations, they would hopefully waste a couple of hours pinpointing their ally's position, giving Zac more time to gain a head start.

The corals turned into a kaleidoscopic blur as Zac rushed to create some distance. Only after having swum tens of thousands of meters, did he take out an escape talisman and crush it. Zac appeared dozens of kilometers away, and he quickly oriented himself before setting off again, making a wide berth around the settlement.

The [**Ocean Chart**] of the Havarok warrior provided Zac with everything he needed to make it back to the middle reaches. It even detailed the location of the Death Pulse, saving Zac the need to capture an undead warrior. However, he didn't head toward the Death Pulse, but rather a current somewhat poetically called the River of Broken Ambition.

The name came from the fact it was one of the few currents that could take warriors from the core regions of the Twilight Ocean all the way to the far safer waters in the beginning. Most of the currents, including the Death Pulse, streamed in the direction of the Twilight Chasm, making them unsuitable for his purposes.

He would eventually have to head for the Death Pulse to find Catheya, but traveling against its current would waste months comparing to hitching a ride in the River of Broken Ambition.

Zac kept a frantic pace over the next week, not even stopping for a quick rest, pushing toward the next danger zone. It was a massive maelstrom that had made a vast swathe of the inner ocean extremely precarious to traverse. The energy density was a lot higher compared to outside the turbulent water as well, which was why some considered it a testing ground for those who considered going to the chasm but weren't sure they could handle it.

For Zac, who'd survived months in the depths of the Twilight Chasm, it could barely be considered a challenge, and he cut through the chaotic water like an arrow, saving over a

week on his route. Hopefully, this had also thrown off any potential pursuit, though Zac hadn't sensed any signs of such a thing taking place.

The moment the water stabilized, he took out one of his submersibles and set out, using the vessel to hide his identity from any curious onlookers. From there, Zac's journey became a lot more tranquil. It took him a week to reach the current, at which point his speed more than doubled.

The following weeks, Zac mostly rested and consolidated his gains. The ambient energy had already become too sparse for him to use his Soul-Strengthening Manual, not that he dared use it while traveling. The ship usually sailed itself, but he occasionally had to take over to avoid beasts or greedy cultivators.

More than once Zac encountered ambushes by people trying to snatch the riches of those fleeing from the inner ocean in defeat. These attacks invariably ended in wholesale slaughter this time around since Zac couldn't have his whereabouts spread. At least those short and bloody encounters allowed him to confirm and sometimes expand on what he'd learned from Trakodles.

The Havarok warrior had pretty much spoken the truth, though he'd failed to mention the Havarok was clearly targeting the ancient city that had popped up. Ykrodas had gathered most of his forces to stand guard outside its gates, and their presence in the other areas of the trial was mostly skeleton crews like the one Trakodles had been a part of.

Soon enough, a month had passed along the River of Broken Ambition, at which point Zac detached his vessel from the current and set a new course. He was at the edge between what was generally considered the middle and inner section of the ocean, meaning it was time for him to start looking for Catheya.

He kept her token in hand as he sailed toward the Death Pulse, but the communicator didn't show any sign of activating during the sixteen days until he reached the pulse proper. The Death Pulse itself was just like he imagined, a

massive, kilometer-wide current of condensed death. He'd felt the environment change even hours before reaching it. The difference was palpable now that his submersible was only a few thousand meters away.

It felt like he was enclosed in a warm embrace, in contrast to the poisonous environment of the Life Pulse. The feeling was a poignant reminder of just how unnatural this realm was, with its corrupted energy constantly burrowing into his body. It made him long for the days when he could leave this place. Refocusing, he passed right beneath the current, continuing on the other side.

Zac steered his vessel in a zigzag pattern over the next twenty days along both sides of the Death Pulse. He was trying to get close enough to Catheya for the tracker to activate, and one day his efforts finally paid off. He looked down at the array disk with a mix of anticipation and hesitation as he put away his submersible and entered a dense forest beneath him.

He understood all too well how much chaos he'd created, and he wasn't sure what kind of reception awaited him. He even considered turning around and leaving. Then again, since he could see that Catheya was nearby, the Draugr scion had probably sensed his approach since a few hours ago.

There was no point to his hesitation. He'd decided to put his trust in his Draugr associate, in the fact that she'd not decided to throw him under the bus to protect herself. Of course, that didn't mean he would just blindly go in without some preparations. There was always a risk she could've been captured by his pursuers.

A thorough scan of the surroundings exposed some of the usual wildlife, but no cultivators either living or undead. The spot Catheya had chosen was really desolate, and the area didn't seem to have much in the way of valuable plants. There were no suspicious energy fluctuations, and his danger sense was completely quiet.

If there was a trap waiting, then it was extremely well hidden.

Even if there was some risk involved, Zac swam toward the place his beacon indicated, a small chain of mountains sitting in the middle of the forest. As expected, when he got within a hundred meters of a sheer wall, a gate appeared out of thin air and soundlessly opened. Zac steeled himself as he swam inside, both his axe and his coffin at the ready in case of ambush.

Past the hidden gate was a roughly carved tunnel leading into a small chamber no more than five by five meters. Its walls and ceiling were filled with small holes, and looking into them gave Zac an ominous feeling. The three small skeletons of **[Profane Exponents]** appeared behind his back, protecting him in case something nasty came flying out of those trap holes.

“Hello?” Zac shouted as the seconds passed, and only then did another hidden door open.

Zac flashed inside, and found himself face-to-face with three familiar figures. Catheya sat on an ice crystal crafted into a high-backed chair, and her two followers stood behind her. He breathed out in relief upon seeing they were fine. He hadn’t heard anything about them since setting out, and their situation had been a constant weight on his shoulders.

But in fact, it seemed like they were more than fine. Just over a year had passed, and Zac sensed they’d all made pretty impressive gains to match his own, Catheya most of all. Her aura had always been one of an elite, but it was much deeper now. Not only that, over her head a bounty of **[750–1,000]** appeared, proving her improved aura wasn’t just empty bluster.

Her increase in bounty was proof that her Death-aspected Dao had become a Peak Fragment, though Zac was certain it wasn’t the only Dao she’d improved. Her bounty wasn’t too high, but the cold aura she exuded easily surpassed that of someone with a simple Peak Fragment, which meant she probably had formed some ice-related Dao Branch.

Qirai’s aura had become deeper as well, even if her bounty was still a pitiful **[0–250]**. It was no surprise, considering she

probably had a combat-oriented Dao, possibly coupled with a soul-oriented one. Even Varo felt a bit stronger, though Zac noted he'd lost his badly mangled arm. An empty sleeve now hung at his side.

It wasn't the end of the world. Catheya's master, or her clan if Va Tapek turned out to be a traitor, shouldn't have too much trouble regrowing an E-grade cultivator's appendage. And even if that failed, there was the Corpselord route that was open to the undead. Of course, Varo could also do just fine without the use of a second arm, as evidenced by people like Ogras.

Zac was feeling excited to finally link up with his old allies, but the oppressive feeling in the room was making him a bit unsure whether the feeling was mutual. Catheya and her two companions didn't say anything for a few seconds, opting to mete out even stares that spoke volumes on their own.

"Uh, long time no see. How have you all been?" Zac said with a small smile, trying to lighten the mood since the pressure of Catheya's gaze was starting to get a bit suffocating.

"What was the last thing I asked of you before we split up?" Catheya finally said, her voice shaking with barely contained fury as the room turned into a freezing hellscape.

Right then and there, Zac felt he might be better off facing another turtle monster than this enraged trio.

PARTING THE CLOUDS

“The last thing you said?” Zac muttered as he scratched his chin. “Uh... Don’t cause trouble?”

“And what did you do?” Catheya said with a dangerous smile.

“Well, that wasn’t my fault. Uona—” Zac tried to explain, but he didn’t get any further before he got cut off.

“So you did attack her!” Catheya exploded. “No wonder that crazy harlot put a bounty on my head! We haven’t been able to sleep a wink for months because of you! Looking over our shoulders every waking moment, afraid that bloodthirsty she-devil or the Havarok prince would entrap us in their hunt for you. Battle after battle the moment our disguises were exposed!”

“To be fair, she was the one who attacked me first. What was I supposed to do? Let her attack me?” Zac muttered before he froze. “Wait, the Havarok Empire is looking for me as well?”

“What do you think? You surpassed them both on the ladder, and it didn’t take much investigation to find out that you’d been part of the missions to mess with the Living Pulse. With your contribution points, I think they’re seeing you as their number one obstacle to achieving whatever goal they have in here.” Catheya sighed as she slumped in the chair. “I swear... I have never heard of anyone with such a penchant for creating chaos such as you. At least it looks like the

Havarok stopped looking for you two months ago, which gave us the opportunity to find this place.”

“It can’t have been all bad,” Zac said as he took out a chair of his own, shrugging off a layer of frost that had formed on his robes. “I can’t believe you’ve managed to form a Dao Branch this quickly.”

“What Dao Branch? This layered domain?” Catheya snorted as she glared at Zac. “It’s just a third Dao Fragment I was forced to form just to stay alive. My whole cultivation path has been thrown off-kilter because of your unrivaled ability to create enmities. Now I have to figure out what to do with a second Ice Dao.”

“Well...” Zac coughed, feeling a bit bad for Catheya.

Initially, he’d been a bit jealous. He had been forced to go to insane lengths and swallow that mysterious Dao light to form a branch, and she’d accomplished the same in the middle reaches of the ocean? Turns out it wasn’t actually an Ice Dao Branch, but rather two Peak Dao Fragments of the ice variety.

Still, forming a Peak Dao Fragment from nothing in just over a year was almost as shocking as forming a Dao Branch. Besides, the aura she exuded for a moment was simply too great, making Zac believe there was more to it. Did Catheya perhaps have a hidden node that worked similarly to his **[Spiritual Void]**?

Forming another Dao Fragment was a good thing on the surface, but it could also spell trouble. He knew Catheya’s original plan was to form a Dao Branch by fusing her two Daos. Now, she was suddenly saddled with a third Fragment, this one in the same vein as one of her other two Daos.

It wasn’t too uncommon to cultivate two Daos of the same type, but the goal was usually to fuse the two similar Fragments into one Branch. However, she couldn’t do that now, since that would leave a sole death-attuned Dao Fragment. Upgrading that Dao as is would mean flirting with the Boundless Path, which was highly frowned upon in the Undead Empire.

She would ultimately have to still fuse Death and Ice and then complement it with another Ice-based Dao Branch. Problem was, such a path would put tremendous requirements on her affinity to ice. Even elites had a hard time forming and progressing a single mixed-meaning Dao Branch, and Catheya suddenly had to gain the equivalent insight of one and a half pure Ice Branches.

It wasn't just a matter of doubling the time it took her to cultivate. She would require both a lot of additional lucky encounters, life-and-death battles, and time to meditate on a way to piece it all together.

Simply giving up on one of the Dao Fragments wasn't an option either. The System neatly arranged one's insights into packages and named them Seeds, Fragments, Branches, and so on, but it was ultimately just understanding of the universe. It was all one, all connected.

That was why you couldn't just collect a hundred Dao Fragments to boost your Luck and other attributes. Your path would end up in disarray. You'd have problems even progressing in the D-grade with Dao Fragments weighing you down, and becoming a Monarch was simply impossible. How would you form an inner world on such a shaky foundation like a Dao Fragment?

Of course, if Catheya succeeded on her new path, she would be stronger for it. Two Dao Branches were not just twice as strong as one. There was also the added benefit of Dao Braiding apart from the attribute boost. The risk of getting stuck in a bottleneck however, was much greater than going with a more conservative single-branch path.

That was why most, except the real elites, only aimed for one Dao Branch. People who dared to aim for three, like Zac, were exceedingly rare, even in the top factions.

"Your talents were wasted on only going for one Dao Branch anyway," Zac said. "A budding Heaven's Chosen like yourself should have at least two, right? Just look, your new Fragment has progressed by a terrifying amount in one short year."

Catheya snorted, but she did seem a bit mollified. “Well, I *was* considering adding another facet to my cultivation after meeting you. I just wish I would’ve had more time to plan and meditate on the decision rather than being forced into it.”

“If it’s any consolation, pretty much all my insights come from almost getting myself killed, and it’s worked out pretty well so far,” Zac said before his brows furrowed in confusion. “Wait, what does your Dao have to do with me?”

Catheya just smiled as she conjured two ice shards. The first one slowly turned into a beautiful flower, which gave Zac a sense of immense cold, reminiscent of the terrifying bolt Va Tapek had unleashed in Twilight Harbor.

The other shard turned into an icicle, and Zac almost felt his soul getting pierced by looking at its sharp edge. Zac wasn’t sure exactly what insights had gone into that Dao, but he felt it much more aligned with his own Dao of Conflict compared to the other shard. It looked like Catheya had opted to go all in on an offensive Dao while her other one was more all-purpose.

“Sometimes, brute force is simply the best solution, which you are a walking testament to,” Catheya said as she gave him a long look that made Zac’s hair stand on end. “Besides...”

“What?” Zac hesitated, his heartbeat speeding up from the intense stare.

“Nothing, never mind,” Catheya muttered.

“Well, offense is the best defense,” Zac said with a weak smile. “And don’t worry, I’ll be more careful going forward.”

“Please don’t jinx us any further,” Catheya groaned while Qirai almost looked like she had been physically wounded by Zac’s assurance.

“On another subject...” Zac said.

“Yes?” Catheya slowly said as her eyes thinned.

“Here, I have prepared a small token of apology,” Zac said, quickly changing course from asking about the Remnants.

From the sounds and looks of it, the trio barely managed to stay alive thanks to his exploits, and it was just too heartless to immediately ask about his own matters. Instead, he took out three boxes and threw them over to Catheya and her two followers. Inside Catheya's box was the second dumpling, while the other two contained what he suspected to be top-quality Dao Treasures.

"What's this?" Catheya asked, her scowl suddenly replaced by an impish smile.

Zac realized he might have been duped, but he didn't really care. It was ultimately true he'd caused Catheya a lot of trouble, and this was simply making amends.

"I don't know what it's called. I found it in the heart of the Twilight Chasm. It'll provide you with a powerful epiphany, allowing you to improve death-attuned skills in all kinds of ways. I used one to upgrade a skill; it worked extremely well," Zac said. "I think you could also use it when crafting. It might allow you to create a uniquely powerful follower or form a Supreme-grade skill to go with your new Dao."

"Supreme-grade? That great?" Catheya exclaimed as she looked down at the box with shock. "Thank you, it looks like you do have some conscience after all."

The other two nodded in thanks before they stowed away their boxes, and Zac could sense the tense atmosphere had relaxed by quite a bit.

"So, you really went all the way to the chasm," Catheya sighed. "I guessed as much, but I wasn't sure. I wanted to check it out, but some other time perhaps. By the way, were you involved in that enormous snake making the rounds in there?"

Zac smiled a bit helplessly with a shrug. He wasn't sure why the big snake had targeted groups of cultivators at the surface, but he guessed it had taken out any threats to its master's plan. However, Zac wondered if it would still have done the same even if he hadn't ruined its plans at the bottom.

“Should’ve known,” Catheya snorted, whereas Qirai gave him a thumbs-up.

“Don’t listen to the young miss. Cultivators are meant to live large! Otherwise, what’s the point?” The Titan Revenant laughed. “And we were only in true mortal danger a few times while looking for those places.”

“You still looked after getting a bounty on your heads?” Zac said, his heart beating an extra time with his excitement. “Did you find them?”

“Why else would we be hunted day and night?” Catheya glared. “I promised we’d find them, so we did. It was actually not too far from the ravine where we ran into Uona, that crazy witch. Luckily, she was busy decimating a small army and didn’t realize who we were, so she only sent a few blood thralls after us.”

“Near the ravine, you said?” Zac frowned as he got a sense of foreboding.

He’d blasted Uona with a full-powered Annihilation Sphere, and now she just happened to be seen close to the resting place of the second splinter? He wanted to believe in coincidences, but he didn’t need his danger sense to realize his plan might have hit a snag.

“Well, that’s not good,” he muttered.

“That’s the understatement of the year,” Catheya exhaled. “Do you know who the Noz’Valadir are? Varo had heard of them before. They have two Autarchs; both more powerful than our patriarch. And both have a good chunk of lifespan left. I fear they might retaliate against Clan Sharva’Zi unless you can get our ancestor to return.”

Zac’s eyes widened a bit, only now realizing his actions might have implications outside the Mystic Realm. There was an unspoken rule in the Multiverse that the grudges and actions inside Mystic Realms stayed between the members of the junior generation, but there was a limit to everything.

There were no guarantees they would let bygones be bygones if he directly impacted their bottom line with his

actions. And after interrogating that Havarok warrior, he understood what was going on. It was a competition for the opportunity that the Eveningtide Asura was trying to create. If his actions cost the Eternal Clan an Autarch, just how far were they willing to go for revenge?

Would the Undead Empire step in to protect Clan Sharva'Zi? Or at least the more powerful Draugr clans?

“You know, I tried entering the ravine before we were discovered,” Catheya said after the silence had stretched on for a while. “I couldn’t pass the natural formations, but I smelled something familiar. The same thing I smelled from Zac Piker when he caused havoc at the Base Town. The same thing as the tear streaks on your follower’s face.”

“Oblivion,” Zac grunted. “The path of your ancestor. Uona has reason to believe I’ll appear there if she’s figured out the same thing as you.”

“And you’re still going?” Catheya asked hesitantly.

“Have to,” Zac grimaced. “That weird town people keep mentioning, is it close to the ravine, by chance?”

Zac’s last hope was that Uona had simply passed by the area of the splinter while hunting cultivators around the ancient city.

“Not really,” Catheya said, dashing his hopes. “A month’s travel away, maybe?”

“Well, shit,” Zac muttered.

“You really haven’t had enough?” Catheya said with a raised brow. “I don’t exactly know what is hidden in those two places, but my intuition tells me it’s nothing good.”

“I would prefer to stay hidden for the rest of the trial, but I can’t stop now.” Zac shrugged. “I have things that I have to accomplish.”

“Well, one of the locations isn’t that far away.” Catheya sighed as she threw him an intelligence crystal. “Tell me, whatever you have planned, will it be as... impressive... as what you’ve done thus far?”

“Well, this one might get a bit chaotic,” Zac admitted with a crooked smile.

“Give us a moment,” Catheya groaned as she glanced at her two followers, who promptly nodded and left the chambers.

“How bad are we talking? Are you able to say?” she asked when they were alone.

Zac hesitated a few seconds before deciding to tell the truth. “I want to say that nothing will happen, but my hands are tied. The result... is unpredictable. Might be as hectic as the Tower of Eternity. With Uona creeping about, it might get even worse.”

“Is it my ancestor making you do this?” Catheya asked with a frown. “Or is it my master?”

“Neither.” Zac shrugged before he braced himself. “I have completed what your master asked of me. Did you know that he’s working with the Twilight Lord, who just so happens to be the Eveningtide Asura?”

“What!” Catheya exclaimed, looking genuinely surprised. “The Eveningtide Asura from the Zecia Sector? I thought the Asura had been killed?”

Zac didn’t immediately answer, remaining frozen for a few seconds before he breathed out in relief. He’d thought long and hard about just what he could and couldn’t say to Catheya. He’d seen the brand disappearing, and the text had said that “Karma was severed.” However, did he dare bet his life on it?

Ultimately, he’d settled on sharing everything he managed to piece together, but keeping all the information about the egg and the valley for himself, just in case. And it didn’t look like he’d triggered any hidden curse by divulging his findings.

“Apparently not.” Zac shrugged before sharing the information he’d gathered so far.

Catheya only asked a few clarifying questions, and she sat in silence for almost a minute after he was done.

“I finally get it,” Catheya said with sorrow in her voice. “So, the Eveningtide Asura is trying to break through to Autarchy, turning this place into a sacrificial vessel. I can’t believe my master is helping the Eveningtide Asura after all my clan has done for him. And no wonder so many elites have gathered. This will be a real bloodbath.”

“Why do so many factions care whether Alvod tries to break through?” Zac asked.

“A single Autarch emerging can shift the power dynamics in these outer sectors, but it’s not really about that. It’s about resources and why no Autarchs ever emerge in the frontier sectors,” Catheya said.

“Just why is that?” Zac asked curiously.

“These sectors are too lowly, and the true face of the Heavens is shrouded, like the sun being hidden by thick clouds. It’s not possible to ponder on the Grand Dao here. In fact, it’s so bad, Autarchs try to avoid these lower sectors altogether. Just existing in them is a constant drain on their foundation. Without access to the Heavens, they’re like starving beasts sacrificing muscle mass to survive a bit longer.” Catheya sighed.

“With the Heavens shrouded, you simply cannot seize and defend your Dao. Doing so requires a special environment, and this isn’t just an issue of the frontier. Clan Sharva’Zi doesn’t have direct access to such an environment. The whole clan has to contribute to the empire for ages to gain a single chance at Autarchy. Even then, the odds of success are extremely slim.”

“But Alvod has found a way to break this convention,” Zac concluded. “To part the clouds, so to speak.”

“Apparently,” Catheya said. “Normally, I would have said it was a fool’s dream, but considering the weight the multiple factions put on this matter, I think it will actually work. A unique opportunity for Divine Monarchs, situated out here in the lawless frontier... Autarchy without spending a hundred thousand years’ worth of accumulations. No wonder the sharks are circling the waters.”

Undead Empire “Where does that leave us?” Zac asked, exhausted just by the implications. “Are we all screwed? Is there anything we can do?”

“Leave early,” Catheya thoughtfully said. “The Boundless Heavens might provide some sort of lifeline if all hell breaks loose, but I wouldn’t bet my life on it. Perhaps it will consider us a worthy sacrifice in exchange for the ascension of another Autarch.”

“That sounds like the System, alright,” Zac muttered. “This ancient town, do you think it’s related to everything else going on?”

“What, you’re planning on wreaking havoc over there as well?” Catheya countered with a raised brow.

“Not if I can help it, but sometimes you don’t get a choice,” Zac said. “What’s your take?”

“It’s a bit suspicious,” Catheya said. “A mysterious town appearing like this when so much is going on? If I had to guess, it might be related to Aia Ouro.”

CITY OF ANCIENTS

“Aia Ouro? The Eidolon?” Zac said with confusion. “They’re the ones who have conjured the city? Are you sure?”

“They call it the City of Ancients, apparently. It appeared much closer to the Death Pulse than the Living Pulse, so I’ve traveled around that area quite a bit over the last year. And I encountered an inordinate amount of spectral cultivators flitting back and forth,” Catheya said. “Besides, I heard rumors of the Eidolon’s vessel being spotted as well, over a month before the city rose through the ground. Why would such an elite stay in the middle reaches if it wasn’t related to that place?”

“What would a bunch of ghosts have to gain from doing this?” Zac asked.

“I have no earthly idea, but whatever they’re doing should be aimed at helping their elders seize the opportunity for themselves. Of course, I have no idea how things like that work. I wouldn’t be surprised if Aia Ouro themselves didn’t know exactly the purpose of their actions,” Catheya said. “Perhaps there is something at the heart of the City of Ancients that can help wrest control of this realm? That’s the idea I’ve been able to come up with, but the truth is probably only known to some Divine Monarch outside.”

“A bunch of paranoid old goats,” Zac muttered.

“It’s those kinds of people who survive for long enough to become Divine Monarchs.” Catheya winked as she took out a

decanter and two glasses of wine, pouring a cup for Zac. “Now, what will you do after this, provided we survive?”

“What do you mean?” Zac asked as he took a swig.

“You know the kind of chaos you’ve caused, and you seem to have no intention of stopping. I will be questioned the moment I leave this place, and you should know that the contract we’ve entered will not hold,” she said with a helpless shrug. “Not to mention my master and my clan, it’s also likely that the Umbri’Zi family will want to look into the matter. Who knows, with your display, you might attract attention from even higher places.”

“Like the Abyssal Shores?” Zac asked curiously.

The Umbri’Zi family was the Draugr clan ruling over the undead kingdom in the area. Technically, most of the undead provinces in this part of the frontier were subordinates of the Umbri’Zi, including the Kavriel Clan that governed over the Zecia Sector. However, the provinces were ultimately pretty autonomous, simply sending resources in steady intervals.

Zac didn’t have a lot of information about the Umbri’Zi, since their presence wasn’t all that palpable in Twilight Harbor. Catheya had explained their disregard as a matter of pride. The Umbri’Zi was on the precipice of becoming a High B-grade clan, with both an extremely powerful matriarch and a handful of lower Autarchs to lord over their domain.

Their domain wasn’t just the undead kingdom, but they apparently controlled vast territories in the Undead Heartlands. It would be a bit of an embarrassment for a vaunted clan like that to set up shop shoulder to shoulder with a bunch of the living factions in a frontier settlement.

Rather than that, they had others do business for them, like half-blood Draugr forces with some weak link to their bloodline. Furthermore, forces like Sharva’Zi had to pay a tax to the Umbri’Zi rather than the Twilight Lord. Zac felt that it was possible for the Umbri’Zi to look into him after these events.

Hopefully, they shouldn't be antagonistic, considering he worked against the Twilight Lord's interests rather than the Undead Empire's on this occasion.

However, while the Umbri'Zi was well-known, the Abyssal Shores was still a blank. Uona had mentioned it like it was the holy lands for Draugr, yet he hadn't heard a word about it from any other source.

"Well, it's—" Catheya said before she stopped herself and looked at Zac suspiciously. "Wait, why are you asking? Why do you know that name?"

"Uona thought I was from that place," Zac said before he decided to tell the truth. "And I might have rolled with it and used that as my background story from then on out."

A groan filled the room as Catheya slumped forward with her head in her hands, in a shockingly accurate homage to the statue depicting the Crown of Despair.

"Why must you torment me like this?" Catheya said. "You impersonated a person from the shores? Who? Who knows this?"

"Well, there's you," Zac said, getting an exasperated grunt in return. "And Uona. And the Havarok Empire, probably."

"Anyone else?" Catheya asked icily.

"Oh, and the Eveningtide Asura, probably. Well, I told his snake guardian, and it probably passed it along?"

"Why not just shout it in front of the gates to the City of Ancients where a few hundred thousand warriors can hear you?" Catheya said while glaring at him.

"You think that would help?" Zac asked, but he quickly stopped messing around upon seeing she was on the verge of another eruption. "Alright, alright. I'm sorry. I simply didn't have a lot of options, and I didn't want to implicate your family with my actions any further. I figured the Abyssal Shores would be powerful enough they could survive taking the blame."

Catheya's demeanor softened a little, and she eventually shrugged. "Well, that's true. It's not like you're at the stage where you can rock the Abyssal Shores. They don't care about some squabbles on the frontier. They're only interested in the advancement of Draugr."

"So just what is it? Can you tell me?" Zac asked with burning curiosity. Who wouldn't want to know about the peak institute of their heritage?

"Well, it is a matter of the Draugr rather than the empire," Catheya thoughtfully said. "It shouldn't break any commandment if I discuss it, considering you're Draugr. The Abyssal Shores is indeed the seat of our power. But more importantly, it is the origin of our kin."

"What?" Zac exclaimed with surprise. He'd expected the former, but the latter was a surprise.

"There is a mysterious lake of infinite depth and infinite darkness. Not even Autarchs can enter it and come out alive. There are even rumors that one of the non-Draugr princes once entered the Abyssal Lake, only to barely escape with their life intact," Catheya said.

Zac whistled in surprise. A place not even Autarchs could tread... Just what kind of dangers did it contain? As for the princes, Zac was pretty sure she was referring to one of the empire's elusive A-grade cultivators.

"The Draugr are the sole exception. Eons ago, our ancestors emerged from the depths, walking onto the Abyssal Shores. They had no memories of the past, of where they came from. Were they born in the ocean or did they come from some realm hidden in the depths? We still don't know. They only knew they were the Draugr," Catheya said as she glanced at Zac. "This was before the System, mind you."

"Then what happened?" Zac asked.

"Our ancestors lived at the Abyssal Shores until the integration took place, our most powerful ancestors easily rebuffing any attempts to unroot us. But the lake closed itself during those dark ages, and it no longer sustained us. The lake

stopped releasing Miasma, so we were forced to set out into the stars in search of refuge. That's how the Draugr met the other undead races and joined the exodus. Eventually, the Undead Empire was founded, and we moved the lake to its core at a shocking cost," the Draugr scion continued with some wistfulness. "Two A-grade ancestors sacrificed their lives to accomplish the task.

"Today, the lake is once more our Heartland. The Abyssal Shores is the name of our centralized faction. A few of our clans have permanent residence there, while some elites of our race get to train there temporarily. It's in the heart of the empire, so the cultivation environment is naturally unsurpassed. And the lake itself presents us Draugr with unique and unrivaled opportunities."

Zac nodded with a thoughtful look in his eyes. Traveling there to cultivate for a while sounded like a huge opportunity, but he doubted that was possible for him. He was neither a true Draugr nor a member of the empire.

"Well?" Catheya asked with a glare.

"Well, what?" Zac repeated with confusion.

"Your plan?" Catheya exclaimed with exasperation. "Focus up."

"Ah, right." Zac smiled. "Worried for me?"

"Worried about the chaos you infuse into your surroundings," Catheya snorted before she became serious. "Your name is probably known far and wide outside, and my involvement with you is common knowledge by now. I cannot lie to the imperial ambassadors."

They stared into each other's eyes for a few seconds before Zac sighed with some exhaustion. "Well, I'd appreciate it if you kept my situation secret. If it's impossible... Well, that's too bad, I guess. You think the empire would want to kill me or recruit me?"

"Definitely recruit you," Catheya said. "A Heaven's Chosen marked by fate, who could walk among the living as

either a spy or an ambassador? I wouldn't be surprised if some old monster claimed you as a direct disciple.”

Zac smiled at that, but he didn't feel as confident. The warnings of Yrial echoed in his head, and there were no guarantees that he wouldn't end up dissected rather than nurtured. The good news was that he doubted he was interesting enough for an ancient Autarch to make a move. And even if some Monarch came looking for him back in Zecia, so what?

He already had a handful of Monarchs gunning for him over there, and he was doing just fine. No one even knew his real identity, and if things really got out of hand, he could always seal Earth after the assimilation, making sure no clues got out. If worse came to worst, his core personnel would go into hiding across the sector while he became a wandering cultivator.

With his teleportation network, he'd be nigh impossible to catch, and anyone would have to think twice before targeting Earth lest they wanted to bring another Eveningtide Asura event down on their heads. Of course, for that kind of deterrent to be effective, he would need to prove his effectiveness at pushing through the ranks. He would need to be a lot more powerful by the time the integration took place.

“Well, I'll try to be gone by the time my identity becomes an issue. I can always sound out the situation in the future after things have calmed down. I'm planning on heading out to the two locations as soon as possible and leaving the moment I have what I need. The City of Ancients and the fate of Twilight Harbor, I want no part of it,” Zac said.

“We'll leave early as well,” Catheya nodded.

“Could you give me a few days' head start before you leave the realm?” Zac asked.

“That's fine.” Catheya shrugged. “We've already picked up most of the treasures my master had divined for us. There are a few locations left, but I doubt they haven't already been stolen by others by now. We'll move toward the second spot

and help you with reconnaissance. Then we'll exit three days after you've left the ocean."

"No wonder your auras are so much stronger," Zac said with a raised brow. "Were the Life-Death Pearls even the best item your master had the Twilight Lord provide?"

"Well, some of the items on the list weren't as plentiful as the pearls," Catheya said before she gave him a small smile as she leaned forward. "And you are ultimately an outsider. Of course, if you chose to join our family... anything I have would be yours."

"I'm pretty happy with my current situation," Zac rejected without hesitation, prompting Catheya to hump and lean back into her chair. "More importantly, I've collected some things that I'm having trouble identifying. Perhaps you can help?"

"Why ask me?" Catheya said with a studiously lazy tone. "You said it yourself, I'm just a second-seed talent from a force not worth joining. What insights could I possibly provide the vaunted Arcaz Black, the unfettered snake-charmer and unmatched troublemaker?"

"Alright, alright," Zac snorted. "How about this, for every twenty treasures you help me identify, I'll give you one? Please?"

"Every twenty treasures?" Catheya exclaimed. "What's going on? Just how many items have you snatched up? Did you rob the Twilight Lord's treasury or something?"

"Something like that," Zac coughed, prompting Catheya's eyes to widen even further.

One by one Zac started taking out the small mountains of items he'd accumulated since they'd split up. The more common items he'd found in the middle reaches were all in his information package, but that was about it. He had collected a huge number of herbs and materials in the reef forest, especially from all those spatial items, and there were also the items from the chasm itself.

Unfortunately, he'd absorbed most of the treasures he encountered during his bloodline evolution, but there were still

over a dozen items from the floating mountains. Furthermore, he'd collected a large number of treasures hiding in the expansive cave networks in the wall of the chasm, each one more energy rich than the other.

Initially, Catheya had exclaimed over Zac's good luck as he started taking out one box after another, but her demeanor turned from excitement to shock and then to blank incomprehension as the piles of natural treasures grew. Still, she performed her task almost as expertly as Calrin and his cousins.

It took almost two hours, but the results were eventually tallied up. Catheya had only managed to identify roughly 30% of the items, but it wasn't surprising considering most of the things he picked up didn't grow anywhere outside the Twilight Ocean. However, while Catheya couldn't name the majority of the materials, she still displayed an impressive ability to categorize what was left.

Soon, a large pile of Attribute Fruits had accumulated to his side, and Zac's eyes gleamed when he looked at the five herbs that would be able to raise his Luck. He seriously imprinted the aura they emitted so he would remember the feeling in case he ever ran into something similar in the wild.

The other attributes were just a matter of time to fill up thanks to his massive wealth, but Luck-boosting fruits were shockingly rare, and not something that reached auctions very often. Even now, he still hadn't gained a single point in Luck from fruits during the E-grade.

Apart from that, the majority of the items weren't really useful for him in the short run, perhaps except the thirty-odd Dao Fruits he'd save when he found some more insight into his Daos. The vast majority of items were mainly usable for crafting. For example, Catheya had identified a black block of metal as **[Shadesteel]**.

Its main use was to be smelted into runes on weapons, which would strengthen its energy conductivity and the weapon's abilities. There were over a hundred items that would provide these kinds of effects, from leaves that would

form a dye that could help clothes hide one's aura better, to berries that would strengthen the water-based nature in pills.

Finally, there were a total of five treasures, each at the level of a uniquely Supreme E-grade treasure, which was shocking considering that not a single such item was found in most trials. Unsurprisingly, four of them had been found on the floating mountains, with the last one in the lower parts of the cave system.

Two were affinity-boosting treasures, one boosting life and the other death, and Catheya looked at the death-attuned one like a starving wolf.

“Just take it,” Zac smiled.

“What?” Catheya said, her eyes wide with confusion. “You don't want it? Even if it might help you become a cultivator?”

“My situation is a bit special.” Zac shrugged. “That thing won't be of much use to me.”

He wasn't lying. He sincerely doubted a treasure like that would amount to anything more than some food for his hidden nodes. Certainly, many of his followers back home delved into the Dao of Death, but the problem with this trial was that it was somewhat similar to the Tower of Eternity. Some treasures would become useless the moment they were taken outside since they depended on this unique environment.

Anything that could be eaten before leaving should be eaten, and it was better to give Catheya such a treasure than banking on it surviving until he could hand it to someone back home.

“Has my charm finally started to wear you down?” Catheya asked with a wide smile.

“Something like that,” Zac snorted.

“Thank you. I won't forget this,” Catheya said. “How about this? I'll take this and nothing else. Otherwise, I might form a heart demon.”

“Suit yourself,” Zac said as he stowed away the other treasures.

“That’s it for business, right?” Catheya smiled. “Traveling all alone with that bounty on your head for months can’t have been easy. How about you stay a day and recharge your batteries? I have become quite the expert at preparing the various specimens of this ocean, and who knows when you’ll get a chance to drink wine from the Heartlands next time?”

“Alright, I’m in.” Zac laughed. “I guess one day off couldn’t hurt.”

SECOND SET

Zac looked at the receding backs of Catheya and her two companions, sighing before he set out alone in his submersible. As he looked at the empty chamber of the vessel, his thoughts drifted back to Triv's list of necessities for cultivation. One of them was companions, and Zac felt that today.

It was easy to get engrossed in your own world when secluded in cultivation. But while that kind of life had its benefits, it lacked the color of pursuing the Dao in the company of others. He'd only spent a day with the trio to catch up and plan his next step, and nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

Yet that single day was more memorable than traveling through the Twilight Ocean for the past three months, seeing all kinds of marvels. Certainly, it was hard to stay indifferent when being the constant focus of attention of a great beauty like Catheya. He was even starting to get used to the abyssal eyes that he and she shared, and they no longer simply felt like gates to the underworld.

While the situation was flattering, it was a bit hard to deal with. He was a bit dense, but he wasn't blind. There was a streak of something real mixed in when Catheya teasingly flirted with him, and that truthfully scared him. Certainly, part of it was because he was still raw from what happened to Thea, but there was something else.

It almost felt like he was cursed. Hannah had a mental breakdown and tried to murder him, and she was the one who

was the best off among his romantic interests. Alea had been reduced to a Spiritual Tool, and Thea had been straight-up murdered by his own family. The Multiverse was a dangerous place, but part of him couldn't help but wonder if it was the System's machinations at play.

What if the System wanted him focused solely on cultivation so he could keep conjuring Chaos Patterns for it, and it nudged fate to remove all distractions from his path?

There was, unfortunately, no way to know, and he soon dropped the matter to refocus on the task at hand. The volcano was two weeks away, and it would take another two months to reach the ravine afterward. By then, over two years would have passed in the trial, and only the confident would remain.

After all, people weren't automatically teleported out of this trial. The final three months were a safe zone when anyone could leave without getting contribution points deducted for not staying for the full trial. Those who were too late would be stuck inside, and none had ever survived such an ordeal.

There were only so many exits as well, and most would be guarded by hunters looking for wealth and contribution points. Some warriors were mostly here for wealth, and they'd start looking for a way out before the hunters gathered.

The trip was thankfully not too eventful. The appearance of the City of Ancients had drawn a lot of attention, and the number of cultivators who flocked in that area was approaching a million, according to Varo. That left the other regions of the middle reaches pretty desolate in comparison, which suited Zac's purposes perfectly. Encountering cultivators in this area would only waste time without bringing any benefits, considering his **[Ocean Chart]** had already been filled in by Catheya.

Zac wasn't just sitting around during this time. He set his vessel to autopilot the moment he reached a barren stretch before he took out a pile of boxes. Inside were the Attribute Fruits Catheya identified.

Wasting no time, Zac bit into the first of the fruits that looked like a fleshy pinecone. It was one that should boost his Luck, and Zac ate it stem and all. There was no stream of energy spreading through his body after eating the thing, but he rather gained an odd sense of interconnectedness with the world around him.

He felt like a Buddhist monk who'd become one with the universe, but the feeling only lasted a moment before passing. Soon enough he was back to normal, but he still opened his Status Screen to see the results. A smile immediately spread across his face as he saw that his Luck had increased by 12 points in one go, meaning the fruit had provided a full 6 points before his titles boosted the number.

Of course, if the fruit had provided something like 50 points like normal Peak E-grade Attribute fruits did, that would have been far preferable, but Luck Fruits didn't scale like that. Perhaps that was for the best, considering that let Zac maintain his advantage even against higher-grade enemies.

The Monarchs already gained enough Luck through their Daos as is. If they could gain thousands of points into the mysterious attribute through simply eating some fruit, then his enemies would simply stumble upon Earth by chance sooner or later.

After having eaten the first, Zac kept going, working his way through the Luck Fruits until moving on to the other stats. It was lucky the natural treasures were almost instantly refined to the essence needed to boost his physique, considering he stuffed himself with over twenty kilos of fruits before he was done.

And the result was pretty impressive. He'd already set a small foundation with the Technocrat mixtures he'd looted from the Mystic Realm, but this was his first palpable step forward. Altogether, he gained over 100 Base Attributes per stat, a massive step forward that was essentially the attribute equivalent to a High-mastery Dao Fragment.

That might not be enough to make a difference against someone like Uona or Ykrodas, but every little bit counted.

The real prize was his boost to Luck though and the benefits it brought.

[Grand Fate: Reach 500 Luck at E-grade. Reward: Effect of Luck +6%]

Zac hadn't expected to see a title like this, considering it was functionally the same as his old title called "Fated." Normally, the first title of a certain type would prevent him from getting a similar one at higher grades, yet he somehow got both.

His best guess was that things worked differently for those related to Luck, or that some title series simply followed their own rules. For example, the given effect of Luck this time around was 1% higher compared to the F-grade title, making Zac believe it was a chain where he could get the succeeding one during every grade. Put together, they would provide a tremendous boost to Luck.

That was ultimately just a guess, but more Luck was always a welcome sight, and he was now solidly above 1,000 effective Luck. Hopefully, that would mean an even stronger danger sense and even greater instincts for opportunities. Who knew, the boost might even allow him to get the two Remnants without issue, though Zac didn't hold much hope for that happening.

Uona was a disaster waiting to happen, and a couple of Attribute Fruits wasn't enough to give him any confidence he could withstand her furious revenge. That was mostly why he targeted the Shard of Creation first, apart from it being closer to where Catheya hid. Absorbing the first one had almost allowed him to fight a Technocrat Hegemon in F-grade, and this time his soul was far stronger compared to when he'd visited the *Little Bean*.

The shard would hopefully become the ace that would allow him to complete his mission one way or another.

Catheya's information package was extremely detailed, with not only dangerous sites clearly marked, but also popular hunting grounds where one was bound to run into other trial-takers. It allowed Zac to plot a course with minimal

interruptions until he reached his target: the Ouroboros Loop. It was yet another current, this one running perpendicular along the middle reaches.

It took him along the middle ocean through all kinds of underwater environments, but Zac was more interested in going over various information packages than enjoying the view. He'd seen it all by now, and these treasure spots were just a cheap mimicry of the dangers and opportunities he encountered at the heart of the ocean.

His time was better spent working on his cultivation, but since he was a mortal, that wasn't an option during downtimes like this. The long bouts of uneventful travel over the last three months had even made him seriously consider taking up some sort of side profession. Previously, he'd put the matter aside to prioritize shoring up his lacking theoretical foundations, but he was fast catching up with the general level expected of a young E-grade scion.

The problem was that he couldn't figure out what kind of job to learn. It couldn't just be a hobby to pass time, but rather something that he could make use of during battle or his cultivation. The most obvious choice was Alchemy, which would allow him to refine the mountains of herbs he kept collecting.

Unfortunately, that route was probably impossible. A vast majority of Alchemy heritages were based around fire, of which he had no Dao. And even if he found a method where he could make use of his Dao of Life or Death, there was still the looming issue of his energy control. You needed extremely precise control over not only your Dao, but also energy manipulation to extract the valuable parts from herbs and then fuse them into a pill.

Inscriptionists and Array Masters had similar requirements, putting Zac at a loss.

He was only good at using brute force, but what job was that good for? Zac had collected a couple of simple heritages by this point, but none seemed to be suited to his tool kit. For

now, he just kept deepening his horizons while slowly shoring up the foundations of his insights.

The days passed, and Zac was fast closing in on his destination. He detached the vessel from the current and continued by foot. While doing so, he once more went over the reports Catheya had written, a thoughtful frown on his face.

She'd tried entering both the grounds to make sure they were the places he referred to, though Zac guessed curiosity played a big role in her decision. However, she hadn't managed to enter the volcano at all. Entering from above was impossible for various reasons. First of all, there were surprisingly powerful avian beasts circling the volcano above the ocean surface, even Beast Kings, by the looks of it.

It made this place one of the deathtraps of the middle reaches. There were hundreds of these kinds of places in the trial. Spots teeming with danger but no treasure. Sometimes there was simply no reward to go with the risk, and figuring out when that was the case was one of the more valuable skills among explorers.

Apart from the occasional risk-taker hoping to discover something everyone else had missed, most people simply ignored places like these.

The beasts weren't the only problem. Even if you managed to hide from the powerful birds that made the mountain their home, you still needed to find a way to deal with the terrifying heat. Resilient cultivators such as himself would be able to withstand the furious flames of the volcano for a while, but there was also an extremely powerful natural formation powered by the mountain itself.

Catheya believed you'd get stuck around the mouth and slowly get roasted if you tried to enter that way. Thankfully, there were many cracks in the volcano itself, and Catheya posited at least some of them should provide a path to the inner chamber. Unfortunately, those entrances proved to be just as dangerous.

The natural formation didn't extend to those tunnels, but she'd been forced to run for her life to avoid a terrifying ripple

that she said was “an antithesis to her very existence.” It didn’t take a lot of guesswork to understand it was a wave of Creation that had spread out. The question was how to deal with something like that.

Zac had been constantly inundated with purified motes of Creation for years. Would he prove immune to the ripples that Catheya felt would end her life or was he just as susceptible? Zac figured there was only one way to find out, and carried on for another two days until he reached the towering mountain.

It pushed up through the surface of the ocean, reaching thousands of meters into the air, according to the report. Zac didn’t breach the surface, but rather swam toward an area roughly two hundred meters beneath the surface.

It wasn’t based on fears of the avian beasts or something Catheya had written, but rather his instincts. He could feel it, almost as palpable as he’d felt his Origin Mark hidden in the egg before it was dragged into the depths of the chasm. There really was a Shard of Creation in the heart of the volcano, and it was neither at the top nor far beneath the surface.

It was somewhere in the middle, just at the height Zac was heading for. If he needed any further proof, he didn’t need to look far. The dormant Remnants in his mind had woken up, and Zac felt war was brewing as they started vibrating, still locked in each other’s embrace. The quicker Zac dealt with this matter, the sooner these troublesome things would calm down again.

The area around the volcano was quite desolate, with very little plant life growing. It was no surprise to Zac considering he saw ample proof of volcanic activity as he swam closer. The ocean bed was almost entirely covered in layer upon layer of lava rivers that had been frozen by the water. In fact, the water itself was well beyond one hundred degrees where Zac swam, and a normal mortal would be scalded to death in an instant.

Of course, it wasn’t much of an issue to Zac, and neither did it prove lethal for the crabs and mollusks crawling across the walls of the mountain, seemingly digging into the stone

itself. Zac was confused until he spotted a crab unearthing a clump of a red claylike substance and swallowing it in one bite.

This place had created a unique ecosystem of its own, with the creatures beneath the surface eating actual mud filled with fire-attuned energies for sustenance. Meanwhile, the birds of prey above the surface most likely fed on the beasts below. The crabs still contained a lot of the Twilight Energy, but it was almost evenly matched with the fire of the mountain that fed them.

Zac reached the mountain proper, and his very presence scared away the critters crawling around in search of food. It wasn't hard to find one of the cave entrances Catheya had mentioned—they were practically everywhere. However, Zac noted that not a single one of the crabs entered those burrows, even when the availability of that fiery mud should be greater closer to the magma within.

It wasn't that hard to figure out the reason, and he posted up at the edge of a tunnel, patiently waiting with his gaze turned toward the depths. Four minutes passed, and Zac started to wonder if he ultimately was too far out. But suddenly, he felt a shift. A wave of energy swept through the mountain, getting closer until it was almost upon him.

Initially, Zac planned on withstanding the pulse here at the edge of its effective radius, but he immediately pushed back and created hundreds of meters of distance. It was just in time, as a wall of energy shot out through the cave mouth, creating havoc in the area before being dispersed by the Twilight Ocean.

Half a minute later, any sign of its appearance was gone, but some of the energy lingered. Zac swam back with a frown, and felt the remains of the Creation pulse burrow into his body along with the Twilight Energy. Thankfully, his hidden node had no difficulty gobbling it up, but Zac could feel pain all over his body until the wounds were healed.

It was like he'd been instantly sunburnt by standing in the leftovers of the pulse. Though it was more apt to liken it to

radiation poisoning. In either case, it spelled trouble. He finally understood what Catheya had meant when she said an antithesis of her very existence. It wasn't just the energy of the Shard of Creation in that wave, it was far more.

There was fiery energy from the volcano itself, but it took a back seat to the two other powers. The first was unsurprisingly the tainted energy of Creation stemming from the shard, while the second part was pure life. The wave had fused with the Twilight Energy somehow, supercharging and weaponizing the life aspect of the ambient energy.

It would be extremely perilous to take on that wave as a Draugr, even with his hidden nodes gradually absorbing the energy. It was kind of like being in a video game, and he was one of the undead monsters who could be harmed by players casting healing spells. It wouldn't help much that **[Void Heart]** could swallow life-attuned energies if the pulse had already ripped him to pieces.

Thankfully, there was an easy fix to that problem, and a snap echoed out from within his body as Zac broke the seal to his Duplicity Core.

MAGMATIC CORE

The seal hiding Zac's Duplicity Core was broken, and he immediately began the transformation process. Soon enough, he stood at the cave mouth in his human form, and he closed his eyes to sense the remnant energies from the Creation pulse. The supercharged life-attuned energy in the area was still hostile to him, but its effect wasn't much worse than any other attack. It was definitely a better idea to enter the volcano in this form.

Zac wasn't stoked about using his human form and losing the protection of Leandra's array after finding out that the Eveningtide Asura was lurking in some corner of the Twilight Ascent. But what choice did he have? Not getting the Shard of Creation would lead to his cultivation being crippled, which trumped any unproven concerns over his privacy.

The life-attuned energies were now manageable just like the fiery energies that permeated the area, but that still left the weak motes of diluted Creation. The core force that carried the pulse was different to the Creation Energy he usually dealt with, in that this energy was raw, wild, and still tainted by the will of the shard itself.

It was much more troublesome to deal with compared to the distilled energy that was extracted from his trapped shard, and it didn't take long for Zac to realize he wouldn't be able to simply make the energy his own by absorbing it. However, he had another idea of how to deal with the pulses, and he once more waited at the edge of his chosen tunnel. Soon enough,

Zac sensed an identical buildup, though this one was slightly weaker.

It would still serve Zac's purposes, and he readied himself as he sensed the turbulent wave of Life and Creation ripple forward. At the same time, two streams of energy entered his shoulders, and a small shimmering globe appeared between his hands, shuddering with unbridled possibility.

Zac pushed his hands forward, and the mark pushed into the wave of Creation heading through him. Zac imparted his will into the Origin Mark, and the small walnut-sized ball instantly grew into the size of a cantaloupe as it stole the wild Creation in the area to power it.

Zac could sense how the act had started a chain reaction that would only end in disaster, and he hurriedly threw the Origin Mark away before he flashed to safety with **[Earthstrider]**. A blinding eruption of light illuminated the whole ocean for a moment before a fifteen-meter-wide object wrought from an alloy of stones appeared where the mark once was.

It was a chaotic mesh of patterns and materials, and it broke apart the moment it hit the rocky ocean bed. Zac looked at it thoughtfully before his gaze turned to the blistering welts that appeared across his hands.

That bright light had released a wave of chaotic energies that passed right through him, and while his body was already fast at work repairing itself, it was something both hard to defend against and lethal. Zac looked out across the field of crabs, and he could see how many of them shuddered with pain until they slumped down one after another.

Still, the experiment was a success. He'd not been directly impacted by any of the Creation Energy in the wave at all when it passed through him, and even the amount of weaponized Life had been lessened by a good margin. As for the weird rock the bundle of Creation had turned into, it was the result of Zac's wish of the thing turning into a harmless boulder.

Why it didn't turn into a simple rock was harder to guess, and it could be anything from the influence of the Twilight Ocean, his lacking understanding of the Dao of Creation, or even the latent consciousness from the Spark of Creation. In either case, the Origin Mark had turned extremely unstable the moment his purified energies had been joined by the wild energies in the pulse.

Seeing that he'd found a method to push through the pulses, Zac sat down and rested for a few hours to restore himself to perfect condition. Using even a walnut-sized Origin Mark left a small network of fine cracks across his neck, just like the Annihilation Spheres, and he knew he would have to conjure more of them to reach the heart of the volcano.

Those cracks were extremely hard to heal, but they solidified and became invisible after a few hours, lessening the risk of them worsening on their own. In an ideal world, Zac would have wanted to have already cleansed himself before that point, but he still hadn't found a method to do so. Only his natural healing along with the purified energy of opposing Remnants worked, and the cracks generally disappeared after a week or two if it came from a small-sized mark like this.

Zac didn't have weeks to waste, and he set out as soon as he felt his condition was stable. He once more waited at the mouth of the volcano until yet another pulse erupted. This time he didn't interact with the wave of Creation at all, instead opting to slip into the tunnel in its wake.

He knew he had roughly five minutes before the next pulse would arrive, and he pushed his speed as much as he could with [**Earthstrider**]. He turned into a blur, rushing through one tunnel after another, but he swore when he ran into one barrier after another. Three minutes had passed without him making any real headway, forcing him to escape and wait for the next pulse to pass before continuing his scan.

This cycle continued for hours, which later turned to days. There was something odd about those tunnels. It wasn't that they were completely devoid of living things, or that they were wrought from a confusing mesh of a million different materials rather than the rough stone of the exterior mountain.

It wasn't even that the tunnels made no sense from a geological standpoint, though it was a bit related. There was something mysterious about the paths, and Zac almost felt like he was running along the lines of an array rather than paths that were supposed to be the result of heat expansion.

Not only were the paths extremely confusing and almost impossible to memorize, it almost felt like they contained the secrets of the Dao of Creation. Sometimes he was even forced to stop as he felt a surge of inspiration coming on, but the feeling quickly passed. He was missing too much context to understand what was happening.

Thankfully, four days of ceaseless work bore some results. Zac started to gain some sort of inherent understanding, and he managed to make it deeper and deeper between each pulse. He'd even found two paths he believed had a good chance of leading into the volcanic core, where he felt the Shard of Creation calling for him.

It wasn't only thanks to the fact the Creation-wrought tunnels started to make sense to him. He also had two rambunctious Remnants locked in his mind that essentially functioned like compasses. They could definitely sense their sibling hidden in the heart of the volcano, and their energies grew wilder the closer he got.

Those two tunnels he found elicited a far greater response compared to any other pathway so far, making Zac believe they provided a direct path to the shard.

The problem was that the volcano was simply massive, and he would have to push through at least one pulse to confirm. He'd already wasted one Origin Mark on testing the viability of traversing the tunnels, and he couldn't keep racking up the damage to his body right before absorbing the second shard.

If he wanted to go, then he had to go all in. There was some lingering hesitation if he was doing the right thing. After all, he might expend multiple Origin Marks only to find a dead end. If he kept doing that, he would soon enough either run out

of Creation Energy or the cracks would reach an irreparable state.

What choice did he have? His forte lay in brute force, but that was of little help against the powerful natural formation guarding the mouth of the volcano. Zac gritted his teeth and set out the moment his opportunity arose, pushing straight toward the path he felt most likely to bear fruit.

The temperatures steadily rose as the tunnel turned to a blur. He almost felt like he was passing through a fever dream. One moment the walls were made from glistening alloys, which then seamlessly turned into a convoluted crystal cave where he was hounded by thousands of his own reflections.

Dark twisted tunnels, jagged paths he could barely squeeze through, even a spot where gravity itself was suspended, forcing him to fly forward with the help of Cosmic Energy. There was no rule or reason, only unfettered creation. Zac constantly used his evolved movement skill to keep maximum pace, occasionally stepping onto the walls or ground to reset it.

Even then, there was no end in sight after rushing for over four minutes, and he could feel the incoming threat.

Two more streams of energy entered the circuits on his shoulders, and he formed a small Origin Mark in his hands. Soon enough, the wave of Creation came crashing through the tunnel, and Zac pushed his hands forward to intercept. Once more it was a success, and Zac threw the ball behind him, creating a huge eruption of flames this time.

He was currently passing through a submerged patch of tunnel, but not submerged by the Twilight Ocean. It was rather a hard-to-traverse swamp-like water, where the liquid seemed to grip him harder the faster he moved. The inferno incinerated the water that filled the tunnel as it rushed to fill the space in two directions.

Having the ball of Creation turn into a storm of flames was a bit risky, but it was easy to imagine considering he was beset with fiery energies all around. Zac would have preferred to create nothing, but that was simply impossible, from what he'd learned over the past years. Creation was the opposite of

Oblivion, and nothingness was the one thing that could not be brought forth.

Zac was thrown forward by the enormous force, and he barely managed to avoid getting gored by a stalagmite. In fact, the whole area ahead had transformed, going from a cubic hall full of engraved disks to a chamber filled with thousands of sharp spikes.

He could still sense the path to the Shard of Creation was intact, so he kept running while diverting some of his attention to dealing with the alien energies that entered his body in the wake of the pulse. The minutes passed as Zac continued his mad dash, and he forced his way through three more pulses before he reached a massive pool of magma that felt different compared to the endless biodomes he just passed.

At least Zac hoped that was the case. The bubbling pool of lava was the endpoint of the tunnel. If that pool didn't lead into the heart of the volcano, he'd just wasted weeks, perhaps months. After all, he was beset by a searing pain, and he didn't need a mirror to know that his upper body was covered in a dense pattern of cracks.

There was no time to lose, and Zac rushed straight toward the pond, withstanding the searing heat. It wasn't to the point the combination of his Fragment of the Bodhi and massive pool of Endurance was overwhelmed, but he still took out a talisman and infused some Cosmic Energy into it.

A blue film instantly covered his body, and the oppressive heat was lessened by a decent degree. He had hundreds of similar talismans neatly stacked in his ring after his visit to the volcanic trial back in the Zecia Sector, but the heat was the least of his issues.

The rational part of his mind screamed that he was insane, but he still took a deep breath and jumped inside, using Cosmic Energy to burrow deeper and deeper into the magma. The heat was far greater compared to the volcano he'd swum around in to get his Heart of Fire title, but the more pressing issue was that its fire-attuned energies were infused with Creation.

It felt like he was being beset by a series of hallucinations as his surroundings kept twisting while he sank deeper, but the reality was much more dangerous than dealing with some simple illusion arrays. Every second, more foreign Creation Energy entered his body, pushing his **[Void Heart]** to the limit.

His hidden node was ultimately limited, and it was also dealing with the Twilight Energy and fire-attuned energy of the volcano. Soon enough, wild Creation would start accumulating in his body, and who knew what trouble that would cause. Zac hesitated, then conjured another Origin Mark, even if no pulse was incoming.

The ambient Creation was gradually being siphoned into the sphere rather than entering his body, and Zac hurried to make the most of the limited time he could keep it going. The shard was toward the center of the volcano, submerged a bit deeper. Zac felt himself rapidly drawing closer now that there was no confusing pattern of tunnels keeping him at bay.

A sudden burst of light made him stop in his tracks, and he was shocked to find the lava simply ending. He threw the Origin Mark far away before pushing his head through the final layer of magma. The whole heart of the volcano was a massive but slow-moving whirlpool.

In the heart of the whirlpool, there was no lava, but there was something else.

The shard hovered in the heart of the swirl, the magma turning as the Remnant did. With each turn, Zac saw a world of possibilities. In each refraction, he could sense the vastness of the cosmos. This was Creation, true Creation, not diminished or boxed in by his limited imagination.

Last time he hadn't been able to properly observe the Remnant because of the force fields the Technocrats had erected around it. He was shocked at the beauty of it, and almost felt like he was about to be dragged into an illusion. It was nothing like the shard in his cage. Certainly, he could still vaguely see a small crystal in the center, but the true value was the boundless insight it exuded.

If it'd been him in the F-grade, Zac would probably already have jumped over to grasp the treasure in a daze. However, his soul was far stronger this time around, and he was able to dispel the desire burning in his heart. Of course, he was still going to snatch it, but at least it was his decision.

He believed it was, at any rate. Or was this yet another time he'd been manipulated by the System? Ultimately, Zac guessed it didn't matter, and he made one final survey of the situation.

It was clear the Shard of Creation wasn't in a passive state. It was constantly drawing fiery energies from the depths below, and Twilight Energy from the mouth of the volcano. Enormous amounts of energy entered the mysterious object every second, and Zac could feel how its aura was steadily growing. It had already been over four minutes since the last burst, and Zac sensed another would be unleashed any moment now.

The question was, wait for the pulse to pass, or go before he had to withstand another?

Zac chose the former and ignored the painful maze of golden cracks. Just one more. It was either that or risk one of those terrifying pulses erupting from within his body.

The momentum grew, and Zac could sense that even the escaped motes of Creation were being dragged back into the shard, like the water level sinking just before a tsunami. Then suddenly, the universe stopped, and Zac felt his mind drift as the Remnant lit up with a terrifying splendor. It was too much, and Zac desperately closed his eyes as he pushed his Origin Mark forward.

His final mark accomplished its task, but it instantly destabilized from the massive overload of energy. Zac barely had time to swim back into the magma before a terrifying explosion rocked the whole area as a gout of flames shot toward the sky. He felt a wave of unbearable heat turning his skin to charcoal, but that was the least of Zac's worries.

The final point-blank pulse was the straw that broke the camel's back, and the two Remnants that had been locked in a

hate-filled embrace for four years suddenly detached from each other. They entered a pitched struggle, one that was different from normal.

The Shard of Creation railed against the cage with even greater vigor than the Splinter of Oblivion ever did before it got company. However, the splinter actually fought against the shard rather than the cage, over and over blocking the shard's attempts to break out.

And Zac could sense it—fear.

The Splinter of Oblivion was no longer concerned about victory or escape, it was fighting for survival. Zac's eyes lit up, feeling he'd gained an unwilling ally in this task, and he shot forward before any more variables had time to crop up. There were no barriers barring his path, and he effortlessly reached the shard.

First, he took out a box wrought from treasure jade, but it started to mutate and fall apart before he even had a chance to close the lid. He'd somewhat expected this to happen, but it was still a disappointment that he couldn't store the thing. He would have to absorb it now, and grasped it with his left hand.

The crystal was cool to the touch, but Zac was still beset by terrifying agony as his arm started to rapidly mutate and take on a series of grotesque shapes. There was no stopping now, so he pushed the small crystal straight toward his chest. A shudder spread out from his body as the crystal slipped inside without issue, the pulse pushing the swirling wall of magma over fifty meters away.

Zac had no time to worry about his surroundings as he prepared to enter the fight of his life. It was now eat or be eaten.

WHEN FATES ALIGN

Another ripple was released by the shard, and Zac felt like a universe was growing within his body as a storm of Creation spread out from head to toe. His body was rapidly transforming from the wild impulses it emitted, and were anyone watching, they'd be beyond horrified by the sight.

He desperately held on to his image of reality to make sure the changes didn't spiral out of control, but reality became malleable, open to reinterpretation. Alluring whispers beckoned for him to take the chance, to transcend from his lowly form, and an echo of agreement answered from within the cage. Wasn't he disappointed that his human form was so inferior to his Draugr side, be it in energy circulation or storage capabilities?

Why not change it? It only required a single thought.

It was a trap. Zac could feel it even in his muddied state. The Remnants only dealt in backhanded gifts, and until it'd been locked down and firmly controlled, he had to be careful with his desires. An act easier said than done. The rampaging Remnant scurried back and forth with blinding speed, leaving a trail of destructive Creation in its wake.

Try as he might, it seemed almost impossible to curtail its rampage. Why was it so different from the last time? Was it because the shard in the volcano had enjoyed almost unlimited access to vast quantities of energy? Back in the Technocrat vessel, he hadn't turned into a rapidly transforming monstrosity the moment he took on the shard.

Or had he?

Back then, he'd been instantly knocked unconscious before getting whisked away by a vision, and who knew how long he stayed unconscious. This time he managed to stay awake, for better or worse. Part of him wanted to embrace that sweet darkness to avoid the horrifying agony of having your body re-formed into one wretched state after another, but he didn't dare to give in.

There was a good chance this was something new. It didn't seem like the shard's actions were its natural state of creative exuberance. Rather, it felt like the shard had already sensed its sibling, and it was shooting back and forth in an attempt to locate it. Zac couldn't let the thing continue unchecked, but he didn't even have a chance to figure something out before he felt reality slow to a crawl.

The seed was suddenly locked in place just below Zac's neck, and his limbs were no longer undergoing wild transformations between a series of ghoulish creations. Even the enormous whirlpool of magma had ground to a standstill, and it seemed to Zac the only thing that moved were his thoughts.

Unfortunately, even they were starting to become hazy as his vision closed in on him. His mind was being dragged far away, and he desperately tried to tether at least a remnant piece of consciousness to his body before it all went dark.

A crackling full of ebullience echoed out into the void, each snap exuding the primordial Dao. For untold ages, the **[Spark of Creation]** left its mark on the universe, its conceptions inching ever closer to that impossible threshold.

Worlds were born with a single breath. Marvels beyond compare conjured with a thought. Its desire was the Heavens, and its will the Earth. But as the spark grew more powerful, so did its hunger. Not even Creation could overcome the ancient Law of Balance, and every spark of inspiration had its price.

Worlds were born with a single breath, and stars dimmed to never shine again. The spark didn't mind. After all, change was also a form of Creation, and it moved through the cosmos in search of more sustenance to fuel its blessings.

Hunger. Growth. Desire. The spark flashed, its tendrils stretching toward every corner of myriad planes. Creation was never over.

With a wave of his arm, the Spring Saint brought life to the desolate fields, his desire for life bending the harsh elements to his will. Of course, nothing came without a price, and his murky eyes turned to his followers, whose backs were already bent over with premature age. Two years and they were already like this. He inwardly sighed as his eyes turned back to the seemingly lush grass that was springing up all around them.

Self-hatred burned in his heart, but he couldn't stop. He couldn't tell his ardent supporters that it was a lie, that the bountiful gardens he wrought were a calamity waiting to happen. It was all a charade. His desire to create something greater supplanted by an older and undying will.

Soon, it would all turn to dust.

Hopefully, he and his followers would be dead before then. That way, they wouldn't have to witness the evil they'd brought to their world. Even the purest intentions could be corrupted. Even the most benevolent of deeds could be harmful. Life without soul was just corruption, and the world he'd created was hollow.

The whispers had grown so loud, to the point that they almost drowned out the calls of the wild. Regret gnawed at her as she kept running, desperately trying to create some distance from the site of her outburst. A whole settlement turned to a

monument of her folly, her people turned to sacrificial offerings to that insatiable desire.

It was never enough. It always wanted more. More energy, more impressions, more yearning. It could never be satiated. That ancient madness that permeated her very being. Silence was oppression; stillness was death.

She was so hungry. She'd denied herself for fifty years, wanting nothing, doing nothing, wasting her potential and future in an effort to stem the inevitable. Even then, the clamors had grown louder, and her attempts to impose order now seemed so laughable. Four quick jumps took her to the top of the mountain, far from any settlements or reflection pools.

The moons were so beautiful today.

She'd been renamed after Sarda'Lavain, the Shepherd, the moment her talent was discovered. The council had hoped she would be a shepherd, keeping the flock safe from the darkness of the Ymrid Expanse. The moons had looked just like they did now during the ceremony.

Tears streamed down her cheeks, and she finally let herself remember. The whole mountain rumbled as one statue after another appeared, memories given form in one final salute. Ten, fifty, a thousand scenes appeared, wrought with loving detail in stone and wood. They were alive in a sense, as they lived in her desire.

Nature screamed with pain as the Sarda'Lavain led her flock into the one place the curse couldn't follow—nothingness.

Zac's soul was taken on a journey through one horrid fate after another as the world stood still around him. Not one of the visions was a scene of triumph. They all depicted the inevitable doom waiting at the end of absorbing a Shard of Creation, to the point Zac felt something was amiss. Did the

new shard in his body sense he'd already locked away its siblings, and was now trying to wear down his confidence?

If so, it would take more than that. He was just a child in Multiverse terms, but his will wouldn't be broken by something like this. He had goals that kept him on the path. He would get there even if he had to extinguish that ancient will that tainted Creation itself.

And even if he didn't believe in himself, he believed in the System and its greed for more Chaos Patterns. This wasn't the place where he would fall. He simply let the scenes wash over him, each one a lesson to engrave in his heart.

But suddenly, the scenes stopped, like they had two times before. His consciousness found itself on that lofty mountain, staring at the being sitting on the peak as the sky danced in a thousand colors, each ray containing a facet of truth that far surpassed anything Zac knew.

"Oh?" the Aetherlord said as he opened his eyes, his word rife with the Dao. "You again?"

The last time Zac had been sent to this mountaintop, he'd been in the F-grade and still clueless about a lot of things. A mere frog in the bottom of a well, so to speak, but years of hardship and experiences had greatly broadened his horizons. Only now could he fully appreciate what kind of monster appeared before him.

The cosmos itself bent to his will, and Creation had taken physical form by his aura. It danced across the skies for as far as his eyes could see in every direction. This was not a Dao Field or condensed intent. This was pure Dao fit to be considered Heavenly Law. This man was simply too powerful, even more so than his Technocrat mother.

His presence put pressure on Zac's very existence, like his soul couldn't fathom that something so grand was crammed into a single body. Then again, it was perhaps not only his perception that was different compared to the last. Zac felt more tangible, more than just a wisp of consciousness.

“Just a blink of an eye has passed, yet you have once more drunk from the poisonous water of false Creation. I warned you when we parted ways that the hunger for the boundless will leave you a withered husk,” he said with disdain. “Yet you once more run the errands of the Villainous Heavens.”

“Aren’t you the same?” Zac muttered, and he immediately regretted it.

Maybe the Aetherlord hadn’t heard him? It was hard to tell in Zac’s current form whether his words were real or just stray thoughts. However, the sneer on the Aetherlord’s face gave him an answer, and Zac tried to leave. This man was terrifyingly powerful. And a bit of a bastard judging by their last encounter. Who knew what he would do this time.

He only needed to speak with Be’Zi anyway, and seeing this guy was proof enough that the plan was feasible. The world shuddered as Zac tried to drag himself back through his spiritual anchor, but it suddenly stabilized as the connection was cut.

“Don’t be so hasty to leave, human,” the Aetherlord said. “And don’t get your facts mixed up. It is not the shards that bring us together, it is the Cursed Heavens. I took no shortcut to reach my current height, unlike you, who invited that madness into your heart.”

Zac was shocked to hear the Aetherlord hadn’t actually meddled with the Shards of Creation. Zac always considered him and Be’Zi as some sort of safety net. Those two had made it to the middle or later stages of Autarchy with these things in their bodies, which should be more than enough to achieve his own goals of finding and saving Kenzie.

Now it turned out it was all a lie? They’d simply cultivated Oblivion and Creation without the interference of the Remnants?

“Well, it looks like you handled the first one surprisingly well,” the Aetherlord continued with a ruminating look. “I can barely sense its mark on you. The System stepped in when I would not? Interesting. You might be able to amuse us a while longer.”

“Could you tell me how to fuse the shards?” Zac ventured, seeing as the Aetherlord seemed to be in a good mood.

“You still bear the stench of the Cursed Heavens, even more now than last time. Not destroying you is already testing the limits of my patience,” the Aetherlord said. “However, there is a saying. One is an eternal curse, two is a calamity. Five is... Heh, well, perhaps you will find out? In fact, how about a wager?”

Zac didn't immediately answer, afraid he'd be caught in a similar scheme like with the Eveningtide Asura. However, it didn't look like the Aetherlord Autarch planned on doling out a quest. Zac realized it might not be possible, seeing as how this man seemed to have completely broken from the System.

“Arrive in front of me with five shards within a hundred years, in person or a vision like this, and I will impart you with a Creation of my own,” he said with a small smile. “It will be immensely beneficial for your path.”

“What if I fail?” Zac hesitated. “And what did you mean by calamity?”

“If you fail, then you will simply be another one who failed to satiate the boundless greed of the Villainous Heavens. Make no mistake. Now that you've set out on this path, there is no return,” he said as his smile widened. “As for what calamity means, you will find out soon enough. Now, off you go.”

Alvod's eyes shot open, and he looked at the Twilight Tapestry with anticipation. It had fluctuated precariously for a few seconds as a foreign intrusion made its presence known. However, the unwelcome visitor was soon gone, and the tapestry returned to normal, even stronger than before.

“That brat actually followed through,” Alvod smiled as he rose into the air from his prayer mat.

As expected, that little Draugr hadn't taken his mission to heart, only making a symbolic effort before setting off to look for his own fortunes.

Was his reputation really so bad that someone would distrust him eons after his attack on the entrenched powers? Alvod didn't really care that the world didn't know the truth of the matters back then. He'd followed his heart to right a wrong, not just for himself, but for Zecia's very future. But his infamy did make his life a bit harder.

And now, this Arcaz Black had taken one of those cursed objects, the Remnant from the Spark, by the looks of it. Who knew what kind of trouble the brat would create with that thing kicking around in his body. Being able to impact one's surroundings with such meager strength was a talent worth admiration.

Alvod remembered how one of the purifiers had washed up on his shores along with the scorched remains of the distillation array powering it. He hadn't believed his eyes when he saw how his tapestry had been tampered with in an attempt to force a system of Life, Death, and War.

"You think my path a lie, a defeat?" Alvod snorted as his gaze turned to another spot on the tapestry a few hundred meters away. "Foolish. There are as many paths to the Peak as there are stars to the sky. Just because they have been hidden doesn't mean they're inferior."

Space bent, and he soon hovered in front of the spot he'd previously marked. Even now, Alvod wavered, but soon steeled his resolve. He knew he would encounter all kinds of roadblocks on the road to Autarchy. As long as he could follow his heart, he could live and die without regret. And his heart told him this needed to be done. Otherwise, it would be like having a fly buzzing around in the back of his head.

"You want to abscond with the treasures while everyone else suffers? The council, the undead factions, even the Havarok bastards. They risk everything for the advancement of their path. You think yourself above it?" Alvod muttered as

a ten-thousand-meter-tall wave materialized behind him. “You think yourself safe after the System’s warnings? Naive.”

The wave crashed forward, powered by the weight of a supreme world on the precipice of forming its Dao. The tapestry flickered as an ancient will pushed back, but it was too weak. The crashing evening tide turned into nine streams of monstrous power, and the tapestry was forced to give way.

Alvod pushed his hand inside, ignoring the deep clap of thunder above. Searing pain assaulted him, but he crushed the resistance and paved a path.

“Go now, child,” Alvod muttered with a distorted voice as the pathway shrank. “Hurry.”

Alvod’s pained grimace turned into a smile when he sensed his command being heeded. He sank back toward his prayer mat as his singed hand was gradually healed by a couple of nurturing streams.

“And thus, our fates align.” Alvod grinned as his gaze turned back to the original spot. “There is no escaping what’s to come. Let’s see how you enjoy riding this tiger.”

GOLDEN CANOPY

The towering mountain and the mind-bending sky of pure Dao shattered, as though someone had started up time again as Zac found himself back in his body. He felt like days had passed as he'd been taken through one vision after another, while in reality, it had only taken an instant. The swirling whirlpool of magma once more started spinning, except it was starting to collapse now that there was no shard to maintain balance.

Zac didn't have time to worry about something like that as a tremendous force built up inside his body, a storm of Creation. Not only did it forcibly pull in shocking amounts of energy from the surroundings, it robbed Zac as well. Mental energy, Cosmic Energy, even his life force went into the mix, joining the madness the Shard of Creation was concocting.

The absorption of the shard was quickly getting out of hand. Zac did have one advantage this time around that he'd lacked before. He was almost a whole grade stronger compared to when he'd fled through the Technocrat vessel. More importantly, he now had a properly awakened bloodline to help out.

His pores had once more turned into small vortices that siphoned off some of the endless energy radiating from the Shard of Creation. **[Void Heart]** was hard at work as well, swallowing a decent chunk with every bite. And it quickly became evident that the more Creation Energy his body drew away, the less energy and life force the storm drew from its surroundings.

[Purity of the Void] helped, though it didn't actually expel the Creation Energy, but rather stripped some of the shard's latent will from it. Some even entered his soul aperture, getting swallowed by **[Spiritual Void]**, and some getting infused into the golden ocean. The very system that helped him deal with the Twilight Energy had come through and protected him once again.

Most surprising was a new addition, an unusually powerful vortex that had appeared almost right where the Shard of Creation had been frozen while he was shown the vision—at the top of his sternum, just below his neck. Its suction was not as powerful as **[Void Heart]**, but exponentially greater than the small passive draw from his cells.

However, Zac couldn't see where it went. It just disappeared, like it was drawn to another dimension. There was one very exciting possibility, but there was no way he had time to investigate the situation. Not even his Void Emperor bloodline could contain the vast energies that the rampaging shard exuded. It needed release, and Zac desperately struggled to expel it from his body before he burst at the seams.

A thousand streams that fluctuated between opalescence and gold shot out in every direction, each one of them filled with the majestic force of Creation and Zac's very essence. Anything they touched changed. Most notably, the ocean of magma in the supersized volcanic chamber started to undergo tumultuous changes, and a thousand chaotic scenes played out at once.

And in the middle of it, Zac found himself a conduit of energies he couldn't understand or control. Why was this so different? Pain muddled Zac's thoughts, and he struggled to stay sane as he tried to figure out a solution. But the voices were so loud, almost drowning out his thoughts. It was just a deep buzz in the depths of his brain, but it was rife with meaning.

A constant flood of suggestions, thousands of them crashing into his mind every second. Form wings and fly out of here. Create a tunnel of unmeltable steel and walk out. Turn fire to ice. Become an Elemental and embrace the heat. The

whispers were without reprieve, and Zac started to lose sight of what was him and what was the shard.

He'd thought it would be different with his first set of Remnants being behind lock and key, but the calamity the Aetherlord mentioned had come just the same. Was this the reason for the fall of the Eastern Trigram Sect? One was an eternal curse; two was a calamity where the user became a walking disaster.

Zac despaired as he felt a second wave of unfettered Creation coming on. What was the use of his bloodline improving or a new hidden node being born if he wasn't alive to enjoy it? Then he recalled his talk with the Autarch. He'd spoken like the effect of collecting five shards was something well-known, meaning that two was just a threshold.

A bottleneck that needed to be conquered, no different from the other difficulties he managed to conquer thus far. Others had passed this step before him, so why couldn't he?

The magma beneath his feet turned into a stable plateau of stone, but Zac didn't move away even as magma fell toward him like crashing tidal waves. He needed to somehow force the shard into submission and pass the calamity before he could worry about anything else. Even rapidly transforming lava that had submerged him had to take a back seat.

With his Endurance, Vitality, and gear, he would survive at least half an hour like this, but the same couldn't be said about the Remnant. His body was already overflowing with energy, and Zac knew he couldn't simply make it disappear. The wheels had already been set in motion, and a price needed to be paid.

But did it really have to be his own life force? Zac was reluctant, but he still took out a small box containing what looked like a milky-white diamond, the third of the five Supreme items he'd picked up in the depths of the chasm. Inside, an almost Heaven-defying energy was trapped—longevity. This thing was just like the Longevity Pearls he'd found back in the Tower of Eternity, but on another level completely.

This thing was enough to create over ten Peak-quality Longevity pills, according to Catheya, far more external life force than anyone could absorb on their own. After all, these kinds of treasures were limited, just like Attribute Fruits. Some cultivators could take in more longevity than others, but it would normally not surpass 10–20% of your original lifespan.

For Zac, whose current lifespan was around five thousand years, meant a couple of centuries. Unfortunately, it wasn't enough, just by the rate the shard was going. But as long as he could continuously draw the energy from the gemstone and use it to power the forced creation rather than supplant his own life, he would hopefully not emerge from this as an old man.

The energy kept building, but Zac breathed out in relief when a warm stream of what could best be described as time entering the fleshy blob his arm had turned into. It worked. Instead of losing decades of his lifespan, he'd only lost a couple of months, with the rest coming from the longevity treasure. It was a shame using one of his five Supreme treasures like this, but it was far preferable to dying.

Dealing with the cost of the shard's outbursts was just the first step. Zac cursed when a deep rumble spread through the area as if prompted by his wayward thoughts. Something was brewing, and it wasn't hard to guess what, considering he stood in the heart of a volcano.

The magma around him transformed from molten rock to water, which in turn was instantly vaporized by the searing heat. It resulted in a tremendous eruption, where both magma and Zac were pushed away to make room for the heat expansion. Zac groaned as he felt a few bones snap, but they instantly fused back together thanks to another thought.

He had to stay calm. An errant wish for the hard-to-traverse magma to be more like water had almost knocked him unconscious. Getting out that way was certainly possible, but Zac refused to lean on the shard unless he absolutely had to. He'd seen the result of indulging desire over and over in the visions.

It was a poison. Like the Cosmic Water that seemingly quenched your thirst while burning out your pathways. He needed to seal the Remnant, but there was simply no time. In fact, Zac realized there wasn't time for anything at all as he sensed a terrifying force building beneath him.

This wasn't something like the attack of a Hegemon, this was the fury of nature itself. He couldn't push through the sea of lava and run through the endless tunnels. His mind frantically spun, and he reluctantly infused his will into the third burgeoning pulse building inside him. A wave of opalescent gold shot out, and the whole area around him turned into a fifty-meter diamond with him securely ensconced in a small chamber in its heart.

Zac's arm turned into a blur as he threw out array after array, talisman after talisman, heedless of the cost to enhance his lifeline. It was just in time, as an apocalyptic explosion erupted beneath his feet, and an unbearable kinetic force pushed him down on his knees as he, along with millions of tonnes of magma, shot toward the sky. A deafening bang caught up with him, just as a shocking wall of heat passed straight through his diamond and broke his arrays, setting his whole world on fire.

The stench of seared flesh assaulted his nose, but it only lasted a moment before his body re-formed again. The one good thing about this process was that his body was nigh indestructible, though the same couldn't be said of his other creations. The diamond, famed for its hardness, couldn't withstand the volcanic surge, and cracks rapidly spread through it until it shattered into a million pieces.

Luckily, it had absorbed most of the initial force from getting shot up thousands of meters in the air, and Zac felt a sense of weightlessness. A dozen eyes appeared on his body as he looked around, and he was met with the scene of an endless ocean stretching in every direction. Above him, an impossibly large plume of ash, and an unfathomable amount of lava cascading down toward the ocean below.

Falling from this height would normally not be that much of an issue, especially now that he could use his movement

skill in the air. The more troubling issue was the hundreds of thousands of boulders, each one teeming with fire-attuned energies that had been dragged from the depths of the earth. If just one of them smashed into him, even he would be wounded.

The more pressing issue was once more the shard. Another eruption was brewing. This one far worse than anything the shard had released so far, and Zac prayed it would be its final gambit in imposing its will on him. A storm of life force was drawn out of the gemstone as the voices in his mind reached a crescendo.

A hundred-meter-wide whirlpool instantly formed around him, and the red-hot magma inside the storm turned into cold, cracked stone as all energy was siphoned off. Zac did what he could, but it was too much. He released a roar coming from the very depths of his soul, containing the full force of his mental energy and his conviction.

A huge shockwave pushed the closest lava and boulders away as it dispersed the hurricane that had formed around him, but it was nothing compared to what came next.

A sun had practically been born in the middle of the chaos. A radiant sphere of gold over five hundred meters across. It seemed to be kept afloat by the enormous gout of lava, but the scene only lasted for a second before the gold spread in every direction like a mushroom cloud.

Zac could sense it all through his connection with the cloud as he plunged toward the surface, propelled by both the outburst and his Cosmic Energy. The shard was exhausted for the moment, and Zac took the opportunity to form a sturdy shield of mental energy around it. It still exuded Creation Energy as it struggled to break free, but it was nowhere near as bad as before.

The final explosion had weakened it enough to provide Zac a reprieve and focus on survival. He'd become yet another falling meteor, joining the tens of thousands of others around him. The sound was deafening, with thousands of birds screeching in pain as their bones broke and their feathers

burned, and the falling projectiles created sharp whistling sounds that felt like daggers in Zac's brain.

As bad as it was, it was still nothing compared to what was going on above him, at the epicenter of the final outburst. The golden cloud had spread out and fused the ash, and a storm of Creation erupted within, fueled by the still-ejecting lava. Thousands of sounds wrought from God-knows-what kinds of creations had turned into a deafening cacophony.

As Zac plummeted toward the relative safety of the ocean, occasionally using falling boulders to reset **[Earthstrider]**, he looked back at the chaos he'd caused. And while the sound was enough to turn a man deaf, the scene was simply breathtaking. Zac's eyes widened as he froze in place, even forgetting to breathe.

It was a tree. A tree of Creation.

The thousand-meter pillar of lava created a red-hot trunk, and the golden cloud and ash had turned into an enormous crown. Within the crown, Creation ran rampant, where every branch held a thousand possibilities. No matter where you looked, there was something new, and it almost appeared decorated with magical Christmas lights as new colors joined the gold before being changed into something else.

Zac woke up from the stupor after a few seconds and started to flee farther away. But that scene would stay with him for a long time. That "tree" he'd accidentally formed almost felt as impactful as the grandeur of the Lifebringer Tree he'd seen in his Dao Vision so long ago. In a sense, this magical apparition behind him was more of a Tree of Life, holding not only the key to life itself, but to all creation.

Unfortunately, Zac's lapse in concentration had given the shard the opportunity it needed to escape, and it broke apart the chains that bound it with a burst of energy. However, it didn't start charging another burst. Instead, it started undulating at a weird frequency, and Zac's heart beat an extra time when he felt a matching vibration coming from the cage in his mind.

He tried to trap the shard again, but the Remnant burned through the barriers even though the action made it dim. The shard pushed straight into his soul aperture before Zac had a chance to re-form his cage, completely ignoring the defenses of [**Soul Guardian**]. Despite the shard seeming exhausted, it was like a second sun had entered the area, and the golden ocean especially practically frothed as it was drenched in Creation.

Zac got a bad feeling seeing the shard's course of action, and his fears were realized as it slammed into a seemingly empty spot in his aperture. Though it wasn't simply a random spot, but rather the hidden gate connecting Zac's soul aperture with the cage holding the other two Remnants. The trapped shard frantically struggled in turn, while the splinter was fighting for its life to prevent itself from being overrun.

Another slam rocked his soul aperture, and Zac felt the tunnel would be forced open if he let things proceed.

The shard had entered his soul, and that was Zac's turf. A shimmering haze rose from the glistening core as he released way more mental energy than most Peak E-grade cultivators could muster at the threat of death. It turned into a new cage around the shard, this one so dense, it almost looked corporeal.

The shard fought hard to break out and resume its siege of the prison, but it was to no avail. Cracks formed on Zac's makeshift prison, but they were quickly healed as he kept instilling more and more energy into it. After half a minute, the shard stopped, and Zac was filled with a surge of victory as he landed on the ocean surface.

This was why he'd worked so hard for close to five years, never forgetting to cultivate his soul. The shard was sealed by his mind, and he had plenty of energy to keep it going until he found a permanent solution. He turned back and took one last look at the scene he created before he dove into the ocean.

A golden canopy shimmering with a million lights, a trunk created with the heart of a world, and ten thousand red meteors falling like leaves in autumn.

ERUPTIONS

Zac dove into the Twilight Ocean, and the scenery above was immediately replaced by a subaquatic hellscape. He'd already been somewhat prepared considering the spectacle he caused, but the pandemonium that met him was beyond what he expected.

The whole ocean was a bubbling cauldron as tens of thousands of superheated boulders dropped into the water from above. The falling debris was filled with fiery energy, and the rapid cooling by the ocean caused them to crack one by one, eliciting cataclysmic explosions that spread in deadly chain reactions.

Meanwhile, gouts of lava shot out of the hundreds of cracks in the volcano itself, turning into giant spears that decimated anything in their path. Zac could only keep going, desperately avoiding the mayhem as best he could. Even then, he was constantly wounded by flying shrapnel or boulders slamming into the water from above.

If not for the abundant Creation Energy coursing through his body, he would be covered in wounds after just a minute.

Zac really missed [**Profane Exponents**], his three loyal followers whose defensive properties were leagues beyond [**Innate Ward**], which he'd gotten from his Dao Repository. He really needed to find a way to upgrade [**Hatchetman's Spirit**] soon, and it seemed like focusing on its defensive capabilities would be the smartest course of action.

The visibility was all but null from the soot and the fact the ocean was boiling, so Zac was shocked to suddenly find himself in front of a squad of almost twenty undead warriors who'd formed a protective circle. Most of them were Revenants, with five being Corpse Lords. It looked like they'd decided to investigate the area but had gotten caught up by the chaos.

They'd sacrificed speed to maintain a defensive shield as they moved farther away from the volcano. Zac wanted nothing to do with them, but the opportunity to slip away had already passed since he'd almost entered their formation by accident, placing him just a few meters away from the undead warriors.

"You! What happened here? We hear—" one of the Revenants exclaimed, but his eyes widened after a second. "That bounty! Arcas Black!"

"He's human?" one of the Corpse Lords blurted, and the whole group stared in confusion, seemingly forgetting the chaos that raged around them.

The confusion only lasted a moment though, with some charging attacks while others turned to run for their lives, not wanting to test their mettle against the first-place holder on the ladder. But they were too slow. An enormous wooden hand appeared through the boiling water, the axe in its hand slamming down in their midst. Its edge radiated a blinding sharpness, but there was something different about **[Arcadia's Judgment]** this time.

Thick golden veins covered the wooden hand, adding a second set of inscriptions on top of those that naturally formed in the bark. The golden tendrils didn't stop at the hand either, covering the enormous axe as well, imbuing it with a unique power—the power of Creation.

Zac was normally unable to infuse his skills with the energy from his Remnants, except for his newly created **[Pillar of Desolation]**, but this time it had happened without him even trying. Perhaps it was unavoidable, with his soul aperture being filled with Creation Energy.

Adding the Branch of the Axe would probably have been enough to deal with this group of bog-common trial-takers, and more than ten streams of energy entered Zac as their bodies were turned to shreds from the initial swing. A few had almost managed to activate escape talismans, but the second stage of the skill would soon take care of them.

Or that was what would normally happen.

Instead, a dense maze of golden scars shot out from the axe and covered the area, passing through everything from boulders to corpses, and through the unlucky few who'd survived the initial swing. Zac grimaced, as he knew what would happen next, and a group of pained wails echoed out as the cultivators started to suffer horrifying transformations.

A few turned into grotesque clumps of uncoordinated flesh. Others into base materials. Creation had entered their bodies, and there was no turning back for them. A series of fractal leaves flashed through the crowd as Zac ended the lives of the rest of the members, as much to ease their suffering as to protect his secrets.

Still, Zac wasn't very happy, either with being forced to slaughter a bunch of people or upon learning that there were cultivators in the area. He immediately swam away, afraid that the commotion would attract more people. As he fled, he looked inward to get a better understanding of the situation.

As expected, some Creation Energy had slipped through his mental energy cage when activating [**Arcadia's Judgment**]. He'd tried to maintain a solid barrier around the still-hostile shard, but his ability to focus on multiple things at once was still just awful. His control had been loosened a bit when infusing his Dao into the attack, and a stream of Creation Energy slipped through the cracks even if the shard was still held in place.

Some of it entered his skill, while some entered the golden ocean in his mind. Most of it escaped his soul aperture, much to the delight of the various vortices in his body. It was a bit of a pain in the ass, but Zac believed it was unavoidable. He could see how the shard was already recuperating.

The two other Remnants were able to conjure energy out of nowhere while locked away by both the System and Be'Zi, so it was no surprise his newly acquired Remnant could do the same. He would probably have to occasionally release the valves, so to speak, and expel some energy. Otherwise, his soul aperture was bound to blow up.

Luckily, the initial eruptions had only exhausted half of the life force locked inside the gemstone, meaning he wouldn't have to waste his own lifespan in the short run. Furthermore, he would only have to do this for a few months until he got his hands on the splinter. At that point, he would drain both Remnants with a Glimpse of Chaos, and then shove them into the cage to join their siblings if all went according to plan.

Zac kept going for another fifteen minutes, utilizing **[Earthstrider]** to put more distance between himself and the volcano. Thankfully, it didn't seem his skills would get infected with Creation unless he attempted infusing it with his Dao, allowing him to use the movement skill without worry. Soon enough, he'd left the direct danger zone of the volcano, and immediately took out his submersible.

The large spiraled shell appeared next to him, and jumped into it, speeding off before anyone else could spot him and his human form. He hadn't encountered anyone after that group of unlucky explorers, but the area was bound to be swarming with people soon enough. A lot of trial-takers were gathering in the vicinity of the City of Ancients, but even more cherished their lives and stayed far away.

These people instead put their efforts into collecting the various herbs and treasures strewn across the ocean, and they might come this way to investigate. Zac's ears were still ringing from the eruption, and it could probably both be felt and heard across huge distances. A mortal might try to get as far away from an active volcano as possible, but cultivators were the opposite.

Who knew what kinds of valuable metals and other treasures would be dragged from the depths when a volcano this massive erupted? Zac wouldn't be surprised if those explosive stones that had fallen into the ocean contained all

kinds of nice things. Of course, it wasn't enough to pique Zac's interest. Instead, he set course for the ravine marked on his **[Ocean Chart]**.

The vessel was essentially put on autopilot, with Zac splitting his attention between monitoring the shard and keeping watch for an ambush. After some consideration, Zac decided to stay in his human form for the time being. He would probably have to use his Draugr form to enter the ravine if that place was anything like the volcano, but for now, it felt like an unnecessary risk to rock the boat by entering a weakened state.

Seeing that the situation had calmed down, he opened the ladder with some curiosity. He'd only gained 30,000 contribution points for destroying that mysterious valley back in the Twilight Chasm, a pittance compared to what he thought he should have gained. That place held so many insights into Twilight, but he still only got what looked like a bounty by the System.

This time around, the result was thankfully a lot better.

[Arcaz Black – Contribution: 1,754,274 Rank: 1. Value: 175,000 (Bounty)]

He had gained over 180,000 contribution points in one go, once more pushing past Uona to reclaim the first position. The vampire had passed him a month ago, after steadily collecting contribution points while he was in secluded cultivation or traveling the vast distances of the ocean.

Ykrodas had been closing on him as well, though he'd still lacked around 100,000 points. But now, Zac had claimed the crown again. Honestly, he wasn't too excited about it. The boost was too small to matter in the long run. That Eternal Clan scion seemed a bit haughty, and he was afraid his passing her on the ladder would make Uona redouble her efforts at capturing him.

Hopefully, it wouldn't result in Catheya getting in trouble again while she scouted ahead for him around the ravine and the City of Ancients.

Still, Zac was a bit confused. The energy eruption he unleashed this time around was at least ten times that compared to when he'd felled the mothertree back on Cork Island. Not only that, but he released massive quantities of Creation into the trial, and Creation should hold a lot of insights into Twilight.

Basixally, 180,000 points felt a bit stingy, even if it was a huge chunk, all things considered.

His best guess was that he hadn't gained a single point from the shard itself, and the reward rather came from the volcano and all that its eruption destroyed. Zac had known that was a possibility going in, considering that the Remnants weren't part of the trial. They'd found their way into this Mystic Realm some way, but they weren't actually related to Twilight.

They were on a different path altogether, judging by what he'd seen in the valley. In the Twilight Tapestry, Life was not Life, and Death was not Death. These two concepts had been fused into some other path, moving away from the peak leading toward the Daos of Oblivion and Creation.

Zac might have deduced a logical reason, but he was still quite disappointed with the result. Getting the first position in a trial like this would probably result in an amazing title, and perhaps even Title Permanence. But the Remnants had been his last hope to cinch the position. There was no way he would stick around to the end of the trial, meaning his contribution points would get halved upon leaving.

For him to maintain the lead, he would have needed to get a crazy amount of contribution points from snatching the two Remnants. That way he would have been able to maintain the lead even after getting points deducted. Now, he would be lucky if he could maintain a top-ten position by the time the trial ended.

There was one silver lining though. That magnificent scene of creation and destruction might not have contributed much to the path of Twilight, but it did feel relevant to his own

cultivation. He still hadn't pieced together exactly how, but his experience would be useful for his Fragment of the Bodhi.

He was still far from forming a branch the normal way, and he felt there were some clues hidden in the vision of the volcano tree. He just needed to ponder on it for a while to figure out exactly what inspiration to draw from the experience. Unfortunately, a certain stowaway in his mind refused to give him the peace and quiet to ponder on the Dao.

The Remnant was relentless, like a trapped beast that refused to give in.

The weird humming whispers were a constant annoyance in the back of Zac's mind as the days passed, and the shard kept exuding energy without end. Mostly, it was manageable, with Zac slightly opening the cage now and then to absorb the energy. His body was insatiable, never saying no to more of the High-grade energy.

That was another reason he didn't want to swap to his Draugr form prematurely. The odd node just below his throat was still absorbing energy, and Zac was afraid to do anything that might interrupt the process. There was still no information in his bloodline screen, and he couldn't tell if this node was connected to his Void Emperor bloodline or if it was something that was actually being created by the shard.

With so little information available, he preferred to maintain the status quo.

Meanwhile, the struggle inside the cage abated after a couple of days. The Splinter of Oblivion had essentially taken up a position as a goalie in front of the crack where energy was being siphoned out. However, Zac could feel that the two were just as hostile as before. They were just waiting for an opportunity to turn the tables on the other.

His body was mostly in a good state thanks to the Creation Energy healing him every time he'd gotten hurt during the mad escape. He did, however, feel a bit hollow, for lack of a better word. It was most likely due to the constant transformations his body was put through. It couldn't possibly

be good for you to be turned into a hundred different miscreations in a short span.

Meanwhile, there was also the issue of the numerous golden cracks between his head and shoulders. They'd faded, but he could feel them more than ever before. It didn't seem like they were healing at all, with the constant waves of Creation being released by the shard. The situation wasn't ideal, but he did have some surprising gains from the ordeal.

Putting aside the matters of the new hidden node and his contribution points, he'd pushed [**Force of the Void**] another 4%. Not only that, but Zac actually felt like his bloodline had benefitted in general. His hidden nodes had all gobbled up some of the energy, and it seemed like they kept some for themselves.

And more energy kept pouring into his bloodline as time passed. However, his silent cultivation was suddenly interrupted as the two Shards of Creation suddenly went haywire at the same time. The one trapped inside the fractal prison unleashed a ferocious offense at the splinter while the one in his soul aperture started to rail against the mental energy cage as it spewed massive amounts of energy.

The constant droning in the back of his head had once more turned into a deafening chorus of insidious suggestions, and he felt his mind overcome by endless possibilities. Zac barely had time to jump out of his vessel before he erupted, causing a wave of chaotic Creation to rip through the area.

Thousands of pillars wrought from everything from granite to gold were conjured out of nowhere, and they shot out in every direction like a cluster bomb. Only then did the chaotic voices subside, but not before the newly acquired shard managed to break out of its cage and slam into the pathway to the prison once more.

Zac hurriedly captured the Remnant before he jumped into his submersible and sped off. The situation returned to normal soon enough, except for the murmurs that had grown a bit louder compared to before. He couldn't figure out what had led to the outburst even after observing for a few days. It was

like the two shards were linked and suddenly decided to launch an ambush.

Zac soon came to find that it wasn't a one-off thing. Another eruption occurred just four days later, though Zac was better prepared. Then came a third and a fourth, the shards refusing to settle down.

It caused a massive commotion every time, but there wasn't anything Zac could do about it except make sure he traveled the more desolate parts of the ocean. The whispering murmurs grew louder, and Zac could almost feel frustration building within the shards after a month had passed.

Zac forced the Remnants down over and over, using his massive stores of mental energy to his advantage. If he hadn't started cultivating his soul when he did, he might have been in trouble from the whispers. But thanks to his hard work, it was now more of a constant annoyance than something that affected his mind. He doubted he would go on a rampage like the splinter had tricked him into, at least not in the short run.

Eventually, the journey reached its end. He was just a few days away from the ravine, and he'd slowed down the submersible to a crawl. Finally, he stopped altogether and stowed the vessel away with a frown. The surroundings looked exactly like Catheya had described, but that wasn't the point.

He was supposed to have made contact with Catheya two days ago, but his communication crystal was still unable to form a connection. Not only that, the tracker was inert. Zac took out a blue talisman, and he swore when it turned black after infusing some Cosmic Energy into it.

The whole area was jammed.

CHANGES IN THE RAVINE

Zac looked down at the pitch-black talisman with a frown before he steered the submersible in another direction. The fact that someone had placed jammers in this area was extremely suspicious, and there was a high chance it was related to him. Why else would someone bother with a place like the ravine? According to Catheya's missive, bursts of utter destruction made the area impassable.

Not being able to communicate with the others was a problem, but luckily not one without a solution. Zac continued sailing for another two hours before he stopped at a secluded spot hidden by enormous stalks of seaweed, each one as large as a skyscraper. He donned a cloak to hide his appearance before he stowed the vessel.

For the next hour, Zac swam back and forth, observing one leaf after another until he found one that had a small freeze burn close to the root. He swam down and started digging until he found a Cosmos Sack hidden within the soil.

This was one of the contingencies he'd set up with Catheya during their last meeting. They both figured the area around the ravine could be dangerous, with Uona already having been spotted here once. They decided on a couple of drop-off locations for Catheya to leave a communication crystal in case she had to leave the area.

They hadn't expected the place to get locked down by jammers, but their preparation luckily worked for this situation as well. More importantly, the fact Catheya managed to leave

the Cosmos Sack here meant she'd left voluntarily rather than something having happened to her.

The Cosmos Sack only contained two things: an [**Ocean Chart**] and a communication crystal. Zac threw out a few arrays to hide his presence before he took out the communication crystal and infused it with some energy. A recording of Catheya started playing, and Zac listened with rapt attention.

“Two months ago, something happened in this area. We sensed a terrifying presence in the distance, right at the location of the ravine. It felt like a Monarch had descended, someone even stronger than my master. Shortly after we sensed the aura, the Heavens moved to intercept, and the presence disappeared after just a few seconds.

“An hour later, we spotted hints of Uona's blood river heading in the direction of the City of Ancients. She came from the direction of the ravine, and the powerful aura was most likely related to her. I believe she somehow had her ancestor break into the Mystic Realm and assist her.

“A few minutes later, a terrifying explosion reached us from somewhere far in the distance... in the direction of the volcano. Knowing you, something shocking has probably taken place over there. We observed the ravine for another three weeks, but the place seems abandoned. It's still impassable for me, but it seems the danger is gradually declining.

“Varo managed to discover the origin of the jamming arrays, but we decided to leave them so as not to alert anyone about our presence. By the time you're reading this, we've moved toward the City of Ancients to search for more information. My intuition tells me you'll be coming our way soon.”

The message ended there, and Zac took a deep breath to calm down after the communication crystal stopped playing. He infused some mental energy into the [**Ocean Chart**] Catheya had left behind, and it added three spots, the jammers that had been buried to prevent communication.

Zac put away the Cosmos Sack before he turned in the direction of the ravine. He didn't want to believe it to be true, but his instincts told him that Catheya's intuition was right on the money. For some reason, Uona had stolen the splinter with the help of her ancestor. Perhaps it was simply to mess with him, or perhaps she needed it for something else.

He had to check out the ravine to make sure, but he couldn't set off immediately. Something was definitely up, and he didn't want to meet whatever challenges lay ahead in his human form. Besides, he would have to change to his Draugr form to pick up the splinter in either case.

The problem was that changing his race was a risk to the hidden node still growing in his chest. Furthermore, who knew how the Shard of Creation would react if he suddenly entered a weakened state. Zac couldn't do much about the latter, but he did have a plan for the former. Over the past two months of travel, the node had slowly transformed thanks to being constantly fed energy.

The Creation Energy was no longer entering an invisible vortex when reaching his sternum. Rather, a small bead had formed, and it didn't just swallow Creation Energy. Almost all of the energy that was periodically spat out by his **[Void Heart]** was swallowed by the bead, and it even took on raw Twilight Energy. This turn of events was different from how his previous nodes formed, but that wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

If anything, it felt like a relief that his cultivation for once worked as it did for others. This embryotic stage was how hidden nodes looked for most cultivators after they'd located their nodes and forced them to the surface. Zac had simply never seen it before because he'd opened his hidden nodes using treasures and unconventional methods.

It was a bit weird that it swallowed all kinds of energy on its own. Most hidden nodes needed a cultivator to slowly infuse the node with their cultivation manuals. Then again, Zac guessed he shouldn't be surprised. Nothing worked the way it was supposed to with his body. The problem of not

knowing was unfortunately a weight upon his shoulders that stopped him from activating the Duplicity Core.

If the node had still been hidden, like it was in the beginning, Zac would probably just have rolled the dice and hoped he didn't ruin the node by transforming into a Draugr. Now that the embryo had formed, there was another path available to him—to burst open the hidden node before transforming. That way he should guarantee he didn't ruin the hidden node's formation by changing race in the middle.

Seeing how energy-starved the node was, it might be possible to force it open just by cramming a bunch of random treasures down his throat. Luckily, Zac didn't need to resort to such a crude method. He had something much better.

Two of the Supreme items he'd gotten his hands on were related to affinity boosting. Another was a Supreme death-attuned wood that could raise the quality of an E-grade Spirit Tool upon evolution, and something he hoped to be able to use for Alea in the future. The fourth was a life-saving herb, something that could turn the situation around even if he had a foot in the grave. It contained Time Energy, literally turning back the clock on lethal wounds.

According to Catheya, there would almost be no wound it wouldn't be able to mend, be it physical or spiritual, and would work in either of his forms. The only caveat was the risk of the wound being caused by someone too powerful, like a Late Hegemon or Monarch. Their Daos would most likely be powerful enough to resist being erased like that, nullifying the herb's efficacy to a large degree.

The final Supreme treasure was something every E-grade cultivator wanted, a type of treasure Catheya called a gatecrasher—an item that could help open hidden nodes. These kinds of treasures were commonly called gatecrashers because of the “three gates.” The most common hidden nodes in the Multiverse.

The treasure still wasn't as valuable as the **[Eye of Har'Theriam]** he'd received from Yrial, and for a simple reason. His unnamed gatecrasher couldn't locate and excavate

unearthed hidden nodes. That wasn't a problem now that the node had already been dragged to the surface.

Zac hadn't been too enthused about the treasure before since he hadn't encountered any indication that he possessed more hidden nodes than the three he already opened. But the Shard of Creation had either found one hidden extremely deep or created one out of thin air.

He took a deep breath and shoved the small pill-like bead into his mouth, simultaneously redoubling his efforts to keep the shard trapped. A surge of extremely condensed power slid down his throat, and it stopped at the point it reached his sternum. Zac breathed out in relief that the mote of energy stopped by itself, saving him the effort of actually guiding it.

That way he could keep the Remnant under lock and key as the treasure did its thing. The energy ball reached the small bead, swept in like a black hole swallowing a sun. A stream of supremely condensed energy was continuously dragged from the gatecrasher, entering the depths of the node.

At first, Zac didn't see any change, but soon his mouth curved upward as the node started to grow. At first growing from a dot to a large circle. That didn't seem too odd, but Zac's brows rose in surprise when the hidden node turned into a small triangle. The node was completely different compared to the others or any node he'd read about before.

It almost looked like a triangular well, with a white frame and black water in its depths. Zac wasn't actually sure why he felt that way. The node was pretty small, yet it felt like the hole inside the frame was infinitely deep. More and more energy kept entering, and a few minutes passed until the node shuddered and changed again, this time turning into a square.

At the same time, a set of scripts appeared on the frame, resembling nothing he'd seen before. It wasn't a script like those based on the work of the Apostate of Order, and neither was it the primal engravings on items like the Stele of Conflict. It was something else entirely, seemingly detached from the System.

Four corners turned to five and then six and seven. With every transformation, the script grew denser, more esoteric. Oddly enough, the depth of the “water” actually decreased as it gained more edges. In the beginning, it had almost seemed endless, but by the point it had turned into a heptagon, it felt like a shallow pond.

The shard was unusually quiet during the whole process, but he still frowned watching the process gradually slow down after an eighth corner was added. There was still a decent amount of energy left from the gatecrasher, but the amount that entered the hidden node had turned from a stream to a trickle.

Normally that wouldn't have been a problem, since that would usually mean the process was complete. However, Zac could feel that something was missing. There were only eight edges, and his instincts told him that there should be nine for the node to be complete.

Zac saw how the energy of the Supreme treasure started to dissipate after not being able to enter the hidden node, and he desperately crammed one natural treasure after another into his mouth in hopes that the burst of energy would kick-start the process again. But it was useless. The hidden node seemed completely indifferent to the various chaotic energies that entered his body.

Dao Treasures, crystals, energy-packed herbs meant for Alchemy. Zac tried everything without any result. The only thing that happened was that his **[Void Heart]** got a feast, and **[Purity of the Void]** got busy cleaning up all the gunk. Soon enough, the node stopped absorbing energy altogether, just as it felt like it was on the cusp of forming its ninth and final corner.

Unfortunately, nothing Zac did worked, and he could only give up after an hour of testing. Zac felt a sense of defeat as he cut a deep gash on his arm. Having released a chunk of the accumulated toxins, Zac swallowed a healing pill before opening his Bloodline Screen just in case.

Bloodline: [E – Corrupted] Void Emperor

Talent: Force of the Void – 42%, Void Zone

Bloodline Nodes: [E] Void Heart, [E] Spiritual Void, [E] Purity of the Void

Nodes: [E – Incomplete] Quantum Gate

Zac looked at the screen with a mix of elation and confusion. His fourth node had actually appeared on the screen, but it raised as many questions as it did answers. The easiest takeaway was that it wasn't related to his bloodline—as expected. But what it actually did was still a mystery.

He checked his **[Quantum Gate]** over and over, but there was nothing. The node was practically a mirror by this point, with the pond so shallow it might as well be a windowpane. But there was nothing on the other side, just darkness. It didn't accept energy either, and no matter what he tested, it didn't seem to improve any aspect of his cultivation.

The name itself made Zac think of teleportation, but it didn't emit the slightest amount of spatial fluctuations or energies, and neither did it emit the aura of the Void. No matter how he scoured his memory, he hadn't heard of anything like it, no matter if you talked appearance or name. In fact, he didn't think “Quantum” was a word the System or cultivators used.

But there were some who probably did—the Technocrats.

Together with the odd scripts, it seemed more and more likely that this was an inborn node that the burst of Creation had managed to force open, rather than something it conjured out of nothing. Was this perhaps a node Leandra's family passed on? Was it rather something he'd been implanted with, just like the Duplicity Core?

Of course, the node's origin wasn't as important as figuring out how to fix it. The fact it said Incomplete rather than Corrupted hopefully meant it simply missed that final ingredient to form the ninth edge and properly activate. And did he even dare activate it? It was called a Quantum Gate.

What if the gate connected him to Leandra, or even some sort of doomsday device, through quantum entanglement?

What if the node was completely useless, considering he wasn't swapping out any body parts for machines?

It was impossible to know for the time being. At least the node was stabilized to the point it appeared on his Status Screen, which had to be enough for him to not worry about losing or ruining it when swapping race. Zac spent another hour ridding his body of all the excess energy he accumulated from his feeding frenzy, before sending a command into his Specialty Core.

A wave of weakness hit him as death spread from his core to every inch of his body. He barely noticed it as he kept the shard in check with everything he had. However, the Remnant sensed an opening, and expelled a wave of Creation that forced its way out of the mental energy cage. Zac's body morphed and changed, but he held on while his class-changing process finished.

Only then did he release a wave of Creation that reshaped the seaweed forest into a world of ice. Thankfully, that was the extent of his problems. The Creation Energy still coursed through his body, but it wasn't any more lethal to him in his Draugr form compared to when he was human. Zac still didn't know why, but Creation simply wasn't deadly to his Draugr side, just like Oblivion wasn't any more dangerous when he was human.

It was only when it fused with the Twilight Energy that it became a problem.

However, Zac's eyes widened in shock when he saw that his new hidden node was missing. He decided to delay his mission by a few hours to get to the bottom of the situation. An hour passed, and Zac swapped into his human form once more, and he breathed out in relief that the node had reappeared.

Soon enough, Zac was once more sailing toward the ravine in his Draugr form. It turned out that **[Quantum Gate]** only existed on his human side, in contrast to the bloodline nodes that existed in both. It lent credence to the theory that it was

related to his Technocrat heritage, which Zac had some mixed feelings about.

It did at least open up the possibility that he might be able to discover Draugr hidden nodes in the future, now that it was proven both his sides could have unique hidden nodes. The Void Emperor bloodline was extremely overbearing, to the point it might have made his other nodes extremely hard to find.

Another day passed, and Zac finally reached the edge of the ravine. It looked like a scar in the earth, reaching thousands of meters into the ground. The whole place was shrouded by impenetrable darkness, and Zac felt his hair stand on end as he tried to glean what waited inside. He also strained his eyes to expose the slightest hint of sanguine energy in the vicinity.

His desire was made into reality, and he felt new eyes growing across his face as they looked for any signs of danger. Zac took a deep breath and got his impulses back under control, and the additional eyes closed before disappearing altogether. The brief lapse of control had at least confirmed a few things.

There was both good news and bad news. The good news was that Uona really wasn't in the area, and it didn't look like she'd left any traps. The bad news was that the amount of Oblivion Zac sensed in the depths of the ravine was less than a third of what he'd encountered in the volcano.

THE PRICE PAID

Something was definitely wrong. Zac was still a pretty decent distance from where he guessed the Splinter of Oblivion was located, but he didn't feel his Remnants react at all like they had when he closed in on the volcano. Neither could he pinpoint the splinter's location, as he'd been able to with the shard.

Even then, Zac pushed off from the edge of the ravine and swam into the darkness. He needed to confirm the situation before he set off to start a blood feud at the City of Ancients. Besides, he might be able to find some clues in the depths of just what was going on.

The light from the ocean surface was quickly subdued by pervasive darkness. It wasn't a problem for him, and the chains of **[Love's Bond]** slapped away a shark trying to gobble him up. Zac barely registered the attack as he continued down, following his senses to swim toward where the energy of Oblivion was the densest. Because that was the thing. The energy wasn't gone, it was simply reduced.

Hopefully, the splinter had simply been sealed somehow by the vampire, and Uona had underestimated his ability to break things.

The shark was both the first and last creature he encountered, with the area soon becoming a domain of almost pure death. Just like in the volcano, the death-attuned energies were different from both Miasma and Twilight Energy. It was rather reminiscent of the sphere of darkness that sat at the top of his **[Pillar of Desolation]**.

It burrowed into his body as he swam deeper, seeking to destroy all that it touched. But the energy wasn't nearly as condensed as the weaponized Life in the Creation pulses. Besides, he was Draugr, born from Death far more majestic than this. The ambient energies could barely harm him, and Zac felt he could stay here for days without succumbing.

However, some real dangers were lurking in the darkness.

Zac flashed out of the way, narrowly avoiding a tendril of nothingness that appeared out of nowhere. Inside it, the power of Oblivion hid, destroying everything the tendril touched. The Shard of Creation in his mind shuddered, perhaps eager to clash with the tendril, but Zac simply swam away after having dodged it.

That attack was just the first of many, and Zac soon found himself in a confusing sea of destruction. Water kept disappearing as tendrils swayed back and forth, causing the water to turn extremely chaotic. Even Zac didn't dare risk touching those tendrils without an Annihilation Sphere of his own, and he carefully dodged back and forth as he followed the intensity of energy.

A few minutes passed, and the tendrils grew denser, but there weren't actually any signs of pulses or the like. This was different from the missive, and Catheya had mentioned she'd felt bursts of power much like the ones the Shard of Creation had released. Zac ultimately chose to take a risk and activated **[Abyssal Phase]**.

The world slowed down as his perception of time changed, and his vision turned monochrome. Zac didn't waste any time, shooting forward, effortlessly avoiding hundreds of tendrils that now moved almost in slow motion. They were easy enough to spot in his current form, having a far darker shade of black than anything else. Another minute passed, and Zac reached his destination. A pitch-black mountain that seemed to be the source of all the destruction that raged across the area.

The mountain was like a beehive after having been the home of the Splinter of Oblivion for thousands of years, and Zac stopped in his tracks, studying the patterns in the stone

with interest. It was just like the volcanic tunnels, marked by hidden meaning. The scars in the mountain formed a mysterious pattern, a pattern Zac felt held clues to the truth of Oblivion.

He still had ample reserves of Miasma remaining, so he took advantage of the low danger of the ravine to swim one circle around the mountain, memorizing all the patterns the Remnant had left on the place. Only when he was done did he head straight for one of the thousands of entrances.

However, his mind screamed of danger, prompting him to stop and return to his corporeal form. Just inside the mountain, a shield with a hair-raising aura was erected. His first instinct was that this was a roadblock left by Uona, but on second thought, Zac realized that couldn't be true. It looked like a thick wall of Oblivion had swallowed so much Twilight Energy and ocean water, a solid wall of death had been formed.

This nigh-physical wall, in turn, blocked any water from getting through. Zac stalled before he started forming an Annihilation Sphere, even with the risks it brought. It would certainly be easier to expel some of his overflowing Creation into the barrier and hope it worked, but Zac could sense more than some Oblivion lurking inside the wall of death.

He had no idea what would happen if he attacked Oblivion with a bunch of Creation, which was why he'd countered Creation with Creation back in the volcano. The two Daos were each other's opposites, but that didn't mean they canceled each other out. Worst-case scenario, a mote of chaos would be formed, and that couldn't lead to anything good.

More likely, a completely uncontrollable eruption of energy would blast both Zac and everything around him into smithereens.

The Shard of Creation was clearly incensed upon sensing the purified energy of Oblivion being drawn out of Zac's Soul Core, but it actually restrained itself. Zac would have thought it'd rail against the cage in front of this much energy, but it was like it behaved better the deeper he delved into this place.

Zac didn't know why it was helping him out, but he wouldn't waste the opportunity, and he quickly pushed the Annihilation Sphere into the wall. His sphere was like a black hole, greedily gobbling up more and more energy from the barrier until it had become over a meter across. Zac figured that was enough and threw the sphere away.

The Annihilation Sphere ripped through the water, searing space itself until it imploded, taking tens of thousands of liters with it into nothingness. Zac didn't care about that. He was rather busy squeezing into the breach in case it closed. The inside of the mountain was mostly hollowed out, though some weird, twisted pillars remained.

Zac carefully started moving toward the core, but he stopped after a minute, hearing a shuffling sound.

“You came after all,” a cackling voice said.

Zac looked over with shock as his axe appeared in his hand, ready to unleash a wave of unfettered carnage on whoever had spoken.

However, Zac quickly confirmed it wouldn't be much of a fight. The one who'd hidden in the mountain was on the verge of dying. He seemed to be a Revenant, but his skin was covered in protruding veins with an angry red glare. His eyes glowed red, and he emitted a strong stench of blood. Zac hadn't seen one before, but he was pretty certain that it was a turned blood thrall.

Blood thralls were essentially slaves to cultivators of the Eternal Clan, but many still entered the contract willingly, from what Zac was told. They gave up their freedom, but they gained power in return. Their bodies were filled with “the holy blood,” which functioned as a second source of strength for these warriors.

As long as they properly integrated with the blood, they would become blood servants, who were considered commoners rather than slaves in the domains of the Eternal Clan. In both cases, they could be just as strong as any other elite. The reason Zac didn't see a battle coming was the fact that the blood thrall had lost most of his body already.

Both his legs were gone, as was his stomach. He had one arm intact, but the other ended just below his shoulder. Zac sensed that he was fading, and fading fast. The thrall had probably sealed himself somehow to prolong his life, and now that he had woken up, he would not last very long.

As for the source of his wretched state, Zac could understand it all too well. The thrall had been hit by Oblivion.

“You have a message for me?” Zac sighed.

“Indeed.” The thrall coughed. “Mistress Uona cordially invites Master Black to the City of Ancients to reconcile their differences. The item you are looking for is waiting for you there.”

“City of Ancients? How is your master related to that place?” Zac frowned.

Unfortunately, the thrall only snickered in response and turned into bloody goop. Zac swore as he looked back and forth through the cave, but neither the splinter nor any more thralls hid in the darkness. He even found the spot where the Splinter of Oblivion had once rested. The only thing remaining was an engraved line signed by Uona herself.

‘I took it. You can’t have it. Come fight me if you have a problem with that.’

Zac guessed it was a precaution in case the thrall didn’t make it until he appeared. At least it allayed any confusion from the thrall’s flowery way of speaking. The only way he would get his hands on the Splinter of Oblivion was if he ripped it from Uona’s cold dead hands.

He closed his eyes with exhaustion for a few seconds, taking a few deep breaths to stop his tired and aggravated mind from conjuring some new type of horror at the cost of his life force. Only then did he open them, and he wordlessly turned around and left. He was curious how the hell Uona managed to summon her ancestor to reach the heart of this place, but it ultimately didn’t matter.

She’d decided to cut off his lifeline when the System was holding his cultivation hostage. This was the second time

she'd targeted him while he was minding his business, and it would be the last. She'd told him to come fight her if he had a problem, and Zac swore that she would soon come to regret those words.

Ventus took a deep breath as he looked up at the sky. The stars had shifted, and fate had become obscured. No calculations would be able to foretell the result. His mouth still curved upward, as this was exactly what he'd hoped for.

"You have sensed something," a calm voice said from the side.

Ventus turned to his captor, and his smile widened when looking at the staid face of Ykrodas Havarok. A storm was brewing, and not even this princeling would be able to come out of it unscathed.

"That smile of yours makes me a bit unsettled, templar. I'm starting to feel I would be better off simply killing you to save myself the trouble," Ykrodas snorted.

"Fate will come knocking no matter whether I am alive or dead," Ventus grinned. "So why not keep me alive? That way you'll at least have an inkling of what might happen going forward. Besides, you know the price of killing me. Do you really want to turn the conflict into a blood feud with how the winds are blowing?"

"You're right. A storm is brewing." Ykrodas nodded. "Who knows if your token is still of any use? If you want to stick around, make yourself useful. What did you see?"

Ventus' smile didn't fade, but a pang of fear rippled through his heart. Ykrodas was right. If this was like normal times, a Token of Exchange would be honored, and a ransom would be paid in return for release. But these were not normal times. He couldn't show fear though. He'd calculated everything. The path was narrow, but it was there.

Especially now.

“Fate is gathering over the City of Ancients,” Ventus said as he turned to look at the sprawling city in the distance, the movement prompting his fetters to rattle.

“You don’t need to be a Numerologist to figure that out,” Ykrodas commented. “There’s something else.”

“He is coming,” Ventus said, not bothering to hide the truth. “And he brings a storm in his wake.”

“Arcaz Black?” Ykrodas said with a frown as his aura rose. “Before, you said he wouldn’t become a thorn in my side, and that he was even aiming at leaving early. Now you’re saying he’s coming here? Are you toying with me?”

“Uona has forced his hand somehow,” Ventus said. “I warned you of this probability, that their conflict wasn’t resolved. The details I cannot calculate. I lack information.”

“So he’s coming here after all,” Ykrodas muttered thoughtfully as his aura receded. “I guess his ploy turned out to be prophetic.”

“He should have known better than to tempt the Heavens like that.” Ventus smiled.

“Is his arrival good or bad for the Havarok?” Ykrodas asked as he calmly searched Ventus’ face for clues.

“It can be good,” Ventus slowly said. “It can be bad.”

“Playing games with us,” the princeling’s advisor said from the side, his eyes cold with murderous intent. “Have you not learned your lesson yet?”

An involuntary shudder went through Ventus’ body, but he immediately stabilized his mind again. He’d known torture awaited down the path he chose. Such was the price of trying to siphon Heavenly Fate.

Hopefully, it would all be worth it.

“You should not see Arcaz Black as an agent of the Undead Empire,” Ventus eventually said. “My calculations indicate he has no real interest in the fate of the Realm Spirit or the ascension of Alvod Jondir. He is a lone agent, a messenger of Chaos.”

“Chaos? You think he’s here to make trouble for the other imperials?” Ykrodas ventured. “To prevent one of the other factions of their empire from stealing the opportunity? Is that why the Umbri’Zi is so conspicuously absent?”

“Not figurative chaos,” Ventus said, his smile growing. “Literal Chaos. He is related to that unreachable Peak. A storm of fate is dancing around him, causing havoc on everything it touches. My calculations are becoming less tenable by the second. Therein lies your opportunity, but also the risk to your plans. To everyone’s plans.”

“An E-grade warrior shouldn’t be able to carry such fate.” Ykrodas frowned. “The accumulated providence of those outside should largely negate it.”

“Well, you don’t need to trust me. Soon enough, your Sandsayers will find the shifting dunes unreadable as well,” Ventus muttered. “One month. You’d better prepare yourself. Your seals will fail, of that I am sure.”

“Impossible,” Ykrodas said with a shake of his head. “The Eidolon has tried to break the restriction for half a year without any result, and every day our restriction grows stronger.”

“I’m only relaying what I’ve calculated. I’ve told you already, your plan would have failed in either case. The stars tell me Uona and the Eidolon are walking in parallel, though both sides hide a dagger behind their backs.”

“So, vaunted Starseeker,” Ykrodas snorted, “what is your suggestion for me? Give up and let your temple claim another Autarch?”

“That is beyond what I can see. I can only tell you one thing. When the Heavens descend and all reality cries, give in to his demand. That is your path for survival,” Ventus said as bleeding cracks started to form across his skin. “Don’t forget the price he has paid by that point.”

“The price he has paid?” Ykrodas muttered as he gave Ventus an inscrutable look. “The Havarok are not

unreasonable, but there are some lines that cannot be crossed. It's up to this mysterious Draugr from here on out."

"My lord?" the advisor asked.

"Prepare our backup plan. Start inscribing the heart-sealing brands on our elites. We're entering the City of Ancients in a month." Ykrodas sighed. "Also, prepare the array. I need to send a message outside."

"It'll be ready in three days," the advisor nodded.

Ventus only smiled in return as he slumped to the ground. He'd done everything he could. From here on out, he simply needed to stay alive.

Of course, that would be easier said than done with an avatar of Chaos coming to rip apart the sky.

The story continues in [BOOK NINE](#).

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