

# The First Defier

— (A.K.A. JF BRINK) —

THE  
DARK



# DEFIANCE OF THE FALL

BOOK TWO



## DEFIANCE OF THE FALL

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

Published by Aethon Books LLC.

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## NEW WASHINGTON

After a minute of darkness, a flash of light appeared in Zac's eyes as he appeared in a large room. Zac's brows immediately scrunched up when he saw roughly ten serious-looking soldiers aiming automatic rifles at him. He immediately got ready for a fight as he looked around while he activated **[Mental Fortress]** and the Dao of Trees. A fractal briefly appeared on his forehead, but it soon disappeared into his head.

His new skill was quite convenient, as it kept running automatically after activating, barely using any Cosmic Energy. It would take something like a day before he ran out of Cosmic Energy from its consumption unless someone actually attacked him. Then the consumption would drastically increase, much like with an array.

It was a bit unfortunate that it only had a decent fit with his fractal pathways. His other skills were mostly class skills, which could completely merge with his pathway system, allowing him to bring out their power to the fullest. With **[Mental Fortress]** he guessed he could only bring out roughly 50% of the skill's potential due to the average match. Still, it was far better than nothing, and together with his high stats and mental fortitude, it made for extremely sturdy protection.

There was only one exit to the teleportation room, and it was guarded by the army men. The rest of the interior gave no clues as to where the house was located since there were no windows. Still, he wasn't overly worried, as there were humans in front of him. That meant there was a path to leave,

and no door would impede him since he'd learned the Dao of Sharpness. He could simply cut metal like butter and walk straight through any restrictions.

“What’s going on? Do you welcome all guests with the barrels of your guns?” Zac asked with a glare.

The people in front of him looked like proper soldiers, but Zac had no real way to tell. If they were just pretending in order to lure him into a trap, he would simply destroy them, but if they were actual government personnel, he would tolerate their behavior, even though he didn't like the feeling of having guns pointed at him. Besides, with his erected defenses and his E-grade garments, he wasn't in any real danger, so there was no real need to act hastily.

“Please stay put for a bit until we receive orders,” one of the guards simply answered.

Zac contemplated pushing through the group but stopped himself. Who knew what else lurked behind the door. They might launch an actual rocket at him if he started attacking the guards, and he wasn't sure he'd survive that. The seconds dragged on, and the tense silence became heavier and heavier.

The guards looked hesitantly at each other but didn't lower their weapons. As almost a minute passed, even Zac was starting to get antsy as he considered whether he should bring out his axe just in case. But just as he was about to reach for his Cosmos Sack, the door opened, and another group of people entered, showing a brief glimpse of a nondescript hallway behind them.

“Please excuse our safety measures. There was an... incident recently. My name is Julia Lombard, cultivator liaison of the New Government Initiative,” a female in her thirties said as she entered the room, accompanied by two men.

She had a forgettable appearance, looking a bit like an office drone at a large corporation. She even wore a pantsuit, which felt quite out of place in this new world of theirs. The two men looked more like warriors, each having a sword strapped to their leg.

Since the group had already shown some discourtesy by aiming their weapons at him for a full minute, he decided he'd make things a bit even. He scanned the group with **[Eye of Discernment]** and found that the army guys were only level 15. The two warriors were actually level 29 and 30, though, just falling a few levels short of entering the Ladder. The office lady was almost as strong, reaching level 28, which Zac guessed would be a respectable number anywhere.

The stronger group clearly sensed the scan and frowned as they reached toward their weapons. They stopped, however, after a glance from Julia. Zac hadn't been sure, but it seemed that these people considered a scan pretty rude, same as with the rest of the Multiverse. Ogras had told him long ago that scanning people in a bar or the like was a surefire way to get into a fight unless you were a true powerhouse.

"I understand your reaction, but please understand that anyone who steps through a teleportation array at this stage is likely a dangerous individual, and we have to take some precautions. The incident I mentioned earlier was when a few Zhix warriors entered and immediately went berserk when they saw us humans. Fourteen people died before we were able to annihilate them," she said.

"Zhix?" Zac asked.

"It's what the government calls the insectoid beings, while the Ishiate are the beastmen. We're not sure if that is their actual name, but a scout with identifying skills got that name using the skill on them, so that's what we call them," Julia answered. "May I ask who you are and what force you belong to?" she continued.

"Port Atwood," Zac simply said, not deigning to hide the name of his town. They had no method to get there, and he didn't have any plans to hide its existence from the government in any case. He actually was interested in some cooperation with them as long as they didn't get too greedy for control. He already had scheming demons to worry about and didn't want to add any more headaches to the mix until his position was completely solidified.

“And you can call me Monk,” he concluded with a sigh.

Zac needed an alias that wasn't his real name or Super Brother-Man. He didn't want to give out his real name, since he might be forced to show his power, making it pretty clear that he was a Ranker. That might put his family in danger if they managed to match him with his hometown or some old internet profile that they might have access to. Who knew what things the government had stored, even after the apocalypse.

Besides, his name was a clear indicator that he was the sole ruler of the town, something he was not ready to disclose yet. Since Emily sometimes called him Mr. Monk due to his appearance, he thought he might as well go with it for now.

When he mentioned the name of the town, a few of the soldiers visibly relaxed. Zac guessed that all things were not harmonious, even amongst the humans. He'd hoped that they would band together against the new tribulations, but he guessed that was too much to hope. Humanity had always been splintered and their own worst enemy; why would a simple apocalypse change that?

“Monk, is it? Pleased to meet you. Port Atwood is not a city we're familiar with. May I ask who is running it?” the liaison asked skeptically.

“It's run by a council. We're an isolated town by the ocean. Since we couldn't find any humans by foot, we built a teleportation array to reconnect with humanity,” Zac answered.

“How interesting. As we keep mapping the world, we keep getting surprised by how large our new planet is. Even with our tireless work, we still only have a decent understanding of some parts of the world, but even that area is far larger compared to the old Earth.” She sighed.

“How come your array is private?” one of the warriors gruffly interjected.

“We have a limited understanding of the world and do not dare to open up the teleportation array to the public before

we're confident we won't put the villagers at risk. My job is to scout out the situation and gather intelligence," Zac answered.

"I see. Let me take you to a meeting room where we can discuss things further. I am sure there are many things you are curious about. Sharing information and creating a support system to restore order is the goal of the government, after all," Julia said as she motioned Zac to follow her.

Zac felt that a government wasn't that benign to just do all this work from the goodness of their hearts. People of the Multiverse first and foremost cared about their own empowerment, and in some cases, their clans or factions. Ogras often said that a freely outstretched hand usually hid some barbs, but Zac still followed the liaison, curious what she wanted to talk about.

As they exited the door and went through the corridor, they left the building housing the portal. Zac looked around and found they were in a large compound. It looked like it was some old government or military facility that had been repurposed into a headquarters. The teleportation array was placed alone in a smaller fortified building, and there were even manned turrets close to it.

Soon they entered the main building, which resembled a large office building made of stone and glass. It looked like a real security risk unless they placed some arrays on it, since a casual chop from him could destroy a large part of the structure. In general, he thought that any skyscrapers or anything similar were deathtraps by now unless they had some magical reinforcement.

As they entered the building, they found themselves in a large, high-ceilinged lobby. However, after taking only a few steps, Zac felt a prickling sensation from his newly acquired skill. Someone was using a mental skill on him. Without hesitation, he took a small rock and chucked it like a bullet toward where he sensed the intrusion came from.

He still wasn't sure about the power of his newly acquired skill, or what kind of skills cultivators from the Tutorial possessed, and his reaction came from a fear of his identity

being exposed. If someone got both his name and his level, they would not only know his full name but also that he was Super Brother-Man. It would be quite obvious from his extremely high level, and that in turn could potentially put his family in danger.

The stone hurtled at almost supersonic speed toward a young woman who inconspicuously stood next to a pillar. She tried to hide behind the pillar, but her speed was nowhere fast enough to dodge a strike from Zac. The stone punched a hole in her gut, and she was thrown a few meters back, blood quickly pooling beneath her.

The sudden assault put the warriors in the lobby on high alert, some even brandishing their weapons as they surrounded Zac and Julia.

“That girl just used a mental attack on me, so I reacted on instinct,” Zac commented as he looked at Julia, who couldn’t hide her angry face before she managed to smooth out her features. Zac saw that the girl was still alive, and he felt slightly relieved. Between skilled army doctors and the new world’s high regeneration speeds and miraculous pills, she’d be fine. Things might have gotten more complicated if she’d died, judging by the irate crowd.

He thought he was being nice for not killing the girl. If she’d done something similar to someone like Ogras or most of the other demons, she’d be full of holes by now. But obviously, the government workers didn’t consider his actions benign, as they looked ready to retaliate.

The sight made Zac feel tired rather than afraid. Months and months of ceaseless slaughter had definitely changed his personality, making him more ruthless, and he was ready to fight everyone in this building if it came to it. It was just a shame that he’d create an antagonistic relationship with the government from the start.

Zac’s attack caused widespread anger, but obviously more with some. A young man in army gear brandished an average-looking sword and charged at Zac with a roar. The sword looked about the same as the ones that were carried by the two

men next to Julia, and Zac guessed that the army was in the process of switching over to cold weaponry in order to gain Cosmic Energy from fighting.

“Wait!” Julia shouted, seeing that the situation was turning south, but it was too late.

The angered man charged at Zac and did a wide swing that aimed to decapitate him. However, the clumsy and slow attack seemed like a joke to Zac, who had gone through innumerable battles by now. The swing was all show and no substance, and with a quick jab, he punched the blade on its flat side, making the strike miss its mark by quite a bit.

The strike left the soldier completely exposed, and Zac once again struck out with a punch, this one hitting his ribs. A sickening crunch could be heard as the man flew roughly ten meters away, creating a heap on the floor. He was still alive, though, as Zac hadn't put any real strength in the strike.

“Your ‘New Government’ has an interesting way of greeting travelers,” Zac said with a frown.

He was quite relieved he hadn't given in to Emily's clamoring to bring her along. Even though he hadn't been too optimistic about the government, he thought that they'd at least maintain some order and discipline. He definitely hadn't expected to be in a battle with them within minutes of arriving. Of course, it was his fault as well to a certain degree, but the mostly hostile greeting apart from Julia had made his survival instincts kick in.

“Your teleportation array is starting to feel more and more like a trap rather than an invitation,” he sourly added.

“Everyone calm down! Sergeant Miller and Private Smith will both be fine, but I need people to escort them to the infirmary. The Cultivator Special Branch will handle this incident. Everyone back to your posts!” Julia shouted as she and the two bodyguards pushed an opening in the irate mob. She didn't wait to see if her order was followed, and she ushered Zac into a corridor and, from there, to a secluded meeting room.

The room looked much like any of the conference rooms he'd sat in before the apocalypse, with an oval table seating at most twelve people, with a TV and whiteboard at the side. The walls to the corridor were frosted glass, so he didn't worry about it being a cell.

As they sat down, she actually turned on a laptop that sat on the table and next turned on the TV. Zac was a bit surprised that the two actually worked since there hadn't seemed to be much technology at work down in the lobby.

"How are you getting electricity?" he asked curiously, already having forgotten the incident earlier.

For the humans at this government facility, the gory scene might have been a huge incident, but for Zac, who'd been bathed in blood for months, it barely registered.



## INTELLIGENCE

“A mix of diesel generators and solar panels. We have gathered panels since the fall, and they are actually working better than before, with there being two suns and all. Our goal is to build solar farms outside New Washington and provide the whole town with electricity, but for now, it’s only for critical buildings such as this, along with a few charging stations in the town, and we use it sparingly,” she answered, seemingly taking some pride in their ability.

“Once again, I would like to apologize about the disturbance earlier. But I’d like to remind you not to resort to violence in New Washington. The rule of law still holds, and criminals will be sentenced and jailed,” she said. “Some... confusion might happen while forces are reintegrated into society, and luckily, no one died. The army will simply have to take the events as a lesson to conduct themselves better. I have prepared a small presentation about the current situation and our goals. I’m sure that the leaders of Port Atwood would be interested in this.”

Zac was about to protest that he had been attacked first in both cases, but in the end decided against it, as he was more interested in hearing what she had to say.

“Humanity is currently beset on multiple fronts, and we need to band together to survive,” Julia began her presentation.

“We have both the other natives and the incursions to contend with. The Ishiate have generally been amenable to peaceful negotiations, but any attempt to open diplomatic channels with the Zhix or the foreign forces has been met with

unrelenting violence. Luckily, there is no incursion close to New Washington, but many areas have already fallen,” she said.

“Which areas have fallen, and how come only our government is up and running with a teleporter?” Zac asked, wanting to drag out as much information as possible.

“Our situation is a bit unique. To be perfectly honest, we got lucky. There is no incursion close to us, and together with our high supply of weaponry, we managed to secure the area around this town quite quickly. There were even two battalions of the army that got randomized in close proximity of the town. There are no species of beasts we would categorize as highly dangerous nearby, and we even have some good areas for leveling up our military.

“All this gave us a good head start, but many other areas are coming along. The Scandinavian countries have banded together, creating a new capital called Asgard. They are mainly led by cultivators, though, as they didn’t have very strong governments. We’ve also been in contact with representatives from London, Paris, and Berlin. Their situation is worse since they have an incursion in their area. Many others are progressing as well,” Julia narrated.

“However, we should be clear that we no longer consider ourselves an American government. We’re a world government that consists of a network of decentralized hubs, intent on integrating with the various powers,” she added after some thought.

“How many incursions are there?” Zac asked next.

“Most prolific is the Undead Empire, which already spans an area close to the size of the United States. Luckily, the horde is mainly made up of weak zombies that can be killed, and concentrated efforts by multiple forces have impeded their march, some considering it a farming haven. Furthermore, their control of their area isn’t really strong. There are multiple pockets of resistance within the sphere of influence fighting as we speak.

“The problem with that force is that every death weakens us and simultaneously empowers their ranks. An even bigger problem is that the undead spawned in the area of New Asia, decimating their huge populations. That’s how they’ve grown so quickly. They received hundreds of millions of fodder in just the first months,” Julia answered with a sigh.

“But the undead are only one among many. There are rumors of a rat incursion far to the east, an incursion in the middle of the ocean that some coastal cities can see in the distance on clear days, even two incursions with humans. The latter seem to consider us earthlings unclean and are among the cruelest enemies. They have built an empire founded on slavery, and are one of our prime enemies. All in all, we have located eleven incursions, but we’re sure there are more.

“But progress is being made. The New Government’s first goal has been to establish order in core cities such as New Washington and start mapping out our new planet. Our current continent is simply named Pangea, as from its size, it should be at least the size of the ancient global continent of Earth. Most likely, it is many times larger.

“Forces such as the one you’re part of are an important piece of the puzzle. Many towns and individuals, such as the Rankers, have risen up to meet the challenge of this new era, and our goal is to connect these forces and enable us to fight the common cause. I would therefore sincerely wish to invite Port Atwood into the New World Government,” she said, her eyes shining with enthusiasm.

Zac was mulling over the information. To be honest, the situation seemed better than expected, with various governments working to restore order. However, he knew that it was just a façade. Unless something was done about the incursions, these reborn governments would be crushed one by one when the invaders started expanding for real.

“I can’t make any decisions like that for Port Atwood at this moment. Besides, I would like to tour this city to see what type of society you are building before reporting back,” Zac said noncommittally.

“I have another task,” he added as he took out a note from within his cloak. “I have this list of towns that our citizens are from. Many are anxious to find out the fate of their families, and I am wondering if you know any information about these cities. Both how the cities themselves are today, and where their cultivators ended up.”

On the list were a few American cities, a few Vietnamese ones, and a few random coastal cities Zac had added in order to not give a too clear picture of Port Atwood’s composition. But really, there really only was one of the towns he cared about: the fourth entry, Greenworth. His hometown.

Another town of interest was Allentown, where Emily was from. He knew where the actual town was, but not where the cultivators went. Zac then silently looked at Julia, who scrutinized the list, trying not to show how eager he was.

Soon she opened a program on her laptop and started typing away.

“Allentown’s closest government outpost is Fairfield, but the distance between the two is around a week by car. And when I say that, I mean driving a car with the current conditions. In the old days, it probably would only be a couple of hours. There is currently no teleporter array in the area. It is not viable to travel there at the moment from New Washington, as it’s an enormous distance,” she said.

His heartbeat started to increase. It looked like the government wasn’t just for show; they truly had some decent intel.

“There should only be one cultivator group from a town of that size, but it has yet to be located,” she added, making Zac grimace.

He felt bad for Emily, but his main focus was on Julia’s fingers as she looked up towns. She kept typing on her laptop and writing down the answers one by one. She seemed to know of roughly half the information, either where the cultivators were or where the town was located. As for the Vietnamese towns, the information was way more sparse.

“Greenworth was split up due to its size, and part of it is actually only a week’s travel away from here,” Julia said. “As for the cultivators, some are here or still in Greenworth. The town itself is jointly run by the government and a coalition of cultivators. There is one group reportedly on the other side of the Undead Empire. It’s likely fastest to wait until someone close builds a teleporter if you want to visit there.”

Zac’s heart was threatening to jump out of his chest when he heard his family might only be a week’s travel away. If that was by her standard, he could likely get there far quicker. He forced himself to calm down and properly listen. He had waited for months, and another few minutes wouldn’t matter, especially if there was still important information to be gained from her.

“The last cultivator group of Greenworth is still unaccounted for.” She finished the report on Greenworth.

“If the group is unaccounted for, how do you know it exists?” Zac couldn’t help asking.

“We have learned some rules to the Tutorial and the randomization. Our theory is that the System superimposed the four worlds in the merge, and picked citizens around the same coordinate on respective worlds and placed them together in a Tutorial. That’s why some Tutorials were only humans, and some were overrun with Zhix, for example. Some coordinates would only hold humans, whereas others held all races.

“As for the size of the cultivator groups, they are limited to roughly 10,000 humans per Tutorial instance, as you should know from your own experience. Our census indicates that roughly 7% of the human population was teleported, meaning that roughly 150,000 citizens generated one Tutorial group. Larger cities like Greenworth would generate three groups based on their population. That’s how we know there’s another group out there somewhere.

“Since the other group seemed largely fine with only a 55% casualty rate, we can deduce that Greenworth’s Tutorial was one of the human-only Tutorials. This was also confirmed by the cultivators in our neighboring town. That means there

was no Zhix hive that eradicated the third group like with many other Tutorial villages.

“When we cultivators were returned, we believe that we were returned to the same ‘coordinates’ as before. For example, I was working in Washington before the fall, and I was placed back right here afterward. That’s how we managed to start the rebuilding work so quickly. However, some world’s coordinates seem random. Some returned to Old Earth’s same coordinates. Others were placed on the Ishiate coordinates instead, which could be anywhere on the new planet after the randomization,” Julia narrated.

Zac was on an emotional roller coaster as he listened to the explanation. He had thought that the people in the Tutorial were lucky, but a 55% casualty rate was considered one of the safe ones? Some groups were completely eradicated? Being a normal mortal left in a city seemed far safer in comparison.

Zac had somewhat hoped Kenzie and his father were cultivators before, as that would help them protect themselves. But now he rather hoped they weren’t. The shock from this information almost made him miss another important piece of information, but after a while, he finally noticed it.

“Four worlds? I thought it was three of them that got merged?” he asked skeptically.

“There might only be three, as we don’t know for sure. However, our theory is that there are four. That’s from looking at the larger cities we have mapped, such as New York, London, and Paris. A quarter of the cultivator groups are simply missing, as though they weren’t returned after the Tutorial.

“Our theory is that there is a fourth planet in the mix, likely an uninhabited one, whose landmass is on another continent. Perhaps due to a different type of climate or some other difference, making the System separate it from the rest. A quarter of the cultivators likely were placed there. So far, we have had no luck finding this continent or contacting these groups, though.

“This type of speculation is supported by the fact that the System has put similar topographies together. When it randomized the world, it didn’t put a patch of desert next to a glacier, for example, as that would make no sense. That’s why many of our old continents are randomized, but still somewhat together. A good part of the United States and southern Canada are meshed together with some of Europe, while the more tropical southern America has meshed together with southern Asia and some of Africa.”

Zac was relieved to hear that there actually was some order to the chaos, which would aid his search. However, the information also contained some pretty bad news. Both Emily’s siblings and one of the cultivator groups of Greenworth were unaccounted for, meaning they might actually have been placed on another continent. If that was the case, he wasn’t even sure how to begin looking. His small exploratory vessels might not do the trick, since the distances on this new planet seemed pretty huge.

Still, he had two places to check before it came to that, and the government was clearly still mapping everything out. The lost groups might be found before he had to start looking for a mysterious continent.

Zac’s eyes turned toward the laptop in front of Julia. The thing clearly held all their progress in mapping out the new continent so far.

“I would like to purchase that computer. The map and accompanying information would be very beneficial to Port Atwood,” Zac said. “What is your price?”

“There’s no need for that. The program with the information is public domain, and you just need to buy a computer in the town and connect to the Wi-Fi and download it,” Julia answered with a smile.

Zac was completely surprised by the convenience. His life on the island and with the demons had made him think in more primal ways. The fact that New Washington possessed a citywide Wi-Fi hadn’t even crossed his mind.

“Is the internet still around?” he asked hopefully.

“Unfortunately, no,” the government worker answered with a sigh. “I am no expert on the subject, but the internet was made from a vast network of companies and servers spanning the whole world. When the world was randomized, the network was destroyed. We only have a local network available.”

“Very well, if it is all right with you, I’d like to visit the town now,” Zac said.

“Of course. Take this identification card; it will give you access to this compound. It is a temporary measure while we keep the teleportation array in a guarded area. Oh, and there will be an auction in two weeks held by us and a few other governments. There will be many valuable things appearing that might not be extremely useful to the government, but a huge boon to any individual cultivator.”



## GOING HOME

Thomas Fischer looked down toward the sprawling city of New Washington from the window of his large office.

“What is your opinion, Julia?” he asked as he turned around to the two people sitting by his desk.

“The man calling himself Monk is clearly a high Ranker. It may be bluster, but he looked at our warriors as though they were jokes, and that was after he used **[Eye of Discernment]** on them,” she reported. “My guess? He’s actually Super Brother-Man,” she concluded.

“Bah, Super Brother-Man is a true monster. We still don’t understand how he is increasing in power that quickly since he’s at the top of all the Ladders. That man was strong, but he clearly knew very little, to the point that he might not actually be a cultivator,” a sturdy-looking general next to Julia said with contempt as he looked at a TV that showed the meeting between Monk and Julia. “You just want to finally get a high Ranker to join to validate your little experimental department, even if you have to make things up.”

Julia frowned but looked stubborn.

“He gave off the feeling of blood and barely restrained power. Besides, we suspect that Salvation is staying put in Cradle of God. He punched away John like he was a ragdoll, and never seemed overly worried about his situation in the middle of a military compound,” she retorted.

“Anyone in this room could do the same to John, and besides, he was agitated and didn’t have proper form. I heard

he was riddled with openings, so the feat was nothing special,” the general said with a harrumph.

“As for blocking the investigation skill of Sergeant Miller, a fractal flashed on his forehead during the test. He likely possesses a skill to protect his identity. Our conclusion is that he might actually pretend to be Super Brother-Man or some other top Ranker as a protective measure.

“And look, it worked. You let him walk scot-free after committing crimes in broad daylight. That kind of favoritism will make the government lose their footing and respect,” the general concluded.

Thomas only sighed and mulled it over. “For now, it does not matter whether he is Super Brother-Man or a fake. He is here now, and it’s an all-hands-on-deck situation. If our plan works, he and the others will be at the auction in two weeks, and we will find out more at that time,” he concluded, and both the advisors nodded in agreement.

“Do we still know the whereabouts of the other parties who have arrived through the teleporter?”

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Zac walked along a wide road of New Washington. It was an interesting town, as it felt it was either undergoing extremely rapid industrialization or a real degradation. The old but modern buildings were partly dismantled, making room for thick spiked walls and fortifications. The occasional car actually zoomed past him, but seeing one was a rarity.

Zac doubted that the government actually had managed to start pumping for oil already, so gasoline should be finite. But it might actually last surprisingly long with a large part of the population missing or dead, and fewer people driving due to safety concerns.

Since he’d learned the news of his hometown, he was itching to move, but Emily had told him about the importance of information brokers, so he was currently on the way to an information market, just to compare the info he obtained from the government liaison. Julia seemed to have been upfront, but

Zac wasn't the best judge of that. After having asked around in various shops and from shady-looking people, he entered a nondescript office building some ways off from any main road.

There was no electricity in the building, and the first four floors were deserted. However, as he reached the fifth floor, it was clean and manned. A beautiful young lady sat at a reception desk, smiling at him as he entered, almost giving him the feeling that this was a normal corporation. The gruff-looking armed guards to the side, and the fact that it only was dimly lit by candles, somewhat ruined the feeling, though.

"Welcome to the House of Whispers," the lady said with a smile.

"Uh... Yeah," Zac said a bit hesitantly, feeling that the owner of this information dealership was trying a bit hard with a name like that. "I'm here to buy some information?"

"Certainly, we take payment in either Nexus Crystals or Nexus Coins. Unfortunately, we do not accept World Government Credits. Is that all right?" the receptionist answered.

World Government Credits, or just credits, was a new global currency that the government was trying to introduce. They were unwilling to let go of control of the financial system and tried quite hard to give it credibility. They maintained a one-to-one exchange ratio with Nexus Coins, and even had exchange station set up across the town. However, their success seemed limited, as even in New Washington, many places seemed to prefer the System-run currencies.

Zac only nodded and was shown to a small room, where a clean-cut-looking man in a suit soon entered. What followed wasn't any stealthy meeting where secret notes were passed, but a surprisingly unexciting transaction. Zac listed the information he needed, and the information broker simply quoted a price if he possessed the information.

After Zac agreed upon the price, a text document was shown containing the information. Apparently, they usually put it on a USB drive, but since Zac didn't have one at the

moment, he bought one for five Nexus Crystals from the broker.

All in all, Zac paid roughly six thousand Nexus Coins to confirm all the information he'd learned earlier. He also had the broker download a copy of the government map onto the USB drive.

“We also have a missive on the Rankers in case you are interested. Some of the data is acquired from the government and some from our own investigations. It even has the names of the top ten on the Ishiate Ladder. Only ten thousand Nexus Coins,” the broker added with a smile.

It sounded pretty interesting to Zac, and it wasn't very expensive, so he nodded, and the broker added another file to the drive.

Finally, he bought some information about the rulers and the state of Greenworth. Since the town was somewhat close to here, the report was pretty detailed, and as Zac read through it, his eyebrows scrunched up.

According to the missive, there were five decently powerful people who held control over roughly half the city, whereas the New Government was in control of the other. However, the government officials in Greenworth were essentially corrupt puppets for the cultivators, giving them almost a complete grasp of the town.

According to reports, things were in a far better state compared to how they were in a place like Fort Roger, but it was a place where many died ignoble deaths. Zac was in no mood to continue buying any information and simply took the USB drive and made to leave.

“Since you've spent a fair deal of coins at our establishment, I'll give you a freebie. There is something going on with the auction in two weeks. The government seems to be luring strong people there. Your party is the fifth that has arrived through the teleporter in only the last week. Do with that information what you will,” the man said with a smile.

Zac stopped for a second and nodded in thanks; after that, he left. He wasn't too surprised they knew he'd come through the teleporter. They clearly had some men on the inside in the government, providing them with information.

He made a beeline toward the south, only briefly stopping to purchase a laptop from a street vendor who had them piled on the road. Zac guessed that they were simply taken from empty homes and reinstalled.

After that, he finally left town, preferring to run rather than finding some vehicle. He felt he was likely faster compared to a car anyway with the roads being gone. The first hour or so was pretty uneventful, but soon he was accosted by beasts.

Some were mutated versions of anything living in forests, from snakes to boars. Even a few large birds tried to snatch him up. Some were things he'd never seen before, likely additions from the other planets. Still, it was clear they were beasts from their behavior.

It was far more chaotic than he was used to on the island, where the barghest were everywhere, and the biggest surprise you would get was the occasional imp. On the mainland, he was sometimes attacked by level 10 boars, and in the next hour, a level 50 eagle. Zac was starting to understand why he barely saw anyone after he left the town.

He thought he would see far more humans out hunting to gain levels, but it also made sense people stayed away since it was just so random out here. For Zac, it wasn't very dangerous, but for most people, death lurked behind every corner. If he had been in a town when the integration happened, he'd likely have stayed within the safe walls and done various tasks to gain Nexus Coins. And with those Nexus Coins buy crystals that could be used to level up.

But that very mindset had put humanity in a passive state. The government was more concerned about consolidating their power than combatting the real threat. The undead incursion was already as large as a country, and the others were growing as well. He'd heard no news of any incursion except his being

defeated, but there were some rumors going about the city about some Marshall Clan being about to fight one.

The undead situation was one of the most troubling ones, as they were one of the forces that simply unceasingly devoured everything until a planet was sucked clean and all its inhabitants were killed. He still remembered their description from the information crystal he'd gotten from Ogras long ago.

Still, Zac was only one person, and he possessed no means to stop the invasion at the moment. Even if he went running over there and started swinging away, it would barely make a dent since they already had created millions and millions of zombies.

Zac put those depressing thoughts out of his head and refocused on his journey. The first step was to find his family; after that, he'd have to figure out how to keep them safe. He knew that he'd have to get involved with the incursions sooner or later, but not today.

He kept pushing forward for a few days, following the guidance of the information he'd bought. He had long since learned how to charge electronics with his energy, and could essentially keep a laptop going indefinitely if he held it in his lap. After the first day, the town was marked on his Automatic Map, though, so he could put away the computer.

Along the way, he saw some small towns. Most of them seemed deserted by now, only empty husks remaining. Zac didn't know whether the inhabitants were killed or just moved to larger towns for security, but it gave him a very eerie feeling. But after three days on the road, he started seeing some familiar architecture.

He had finally reached his home.

## FAMILY

It was an odd feeling to walk the highway into the city. It was almost completely empty apart from a few odd cars, a bit different from how it looked in apocalypse movies. Zac guessed that most people had driven home if they found themselves on the highway when the world turned crazy. He didn't know how the restructuring actually looked, since he had been passed out while it took place. Perhaps some people didn't even notice and just kept driving until the road abruptly ended in a forest.

Soon he found himself in the town proper, and it was completely surreal. It wasn't just the rundown nature of the town that was jarring. There were multiple small details that were subtly adjusted. For example, it looked like the topography was actually different in the city from how he remembered it. Where once was a hill, it was now flat, making the houses look a bit odd.

There was no large wall that surrounded the town like the one that had been erected around New Washington, and it seemed the population was a lot smaller compared to before, since he still had seen only a few people scurrying about. Certainly, it was clear that this was only a part of the original town, but still, there was barely a soul on the streets.

And those he saw looked like scavengers, going from house to house looking for anything useful or valuable. Most of the buildings at the edge of the town looked completely deserted, and Zac could also see marks from fights and beasts marring the pavement and walls.

It wasn't until he got closer to the center of the town that he saw a wall being erected. It actually looked like they possessed at least one earth mage in the town, as the wall was a bit similar to his own, albeit far more rudimentary. Zac couldn't see any gates or entrances and was in no mood to look around. Instead, he simply scaled the four-meter wall like it wasn't there, and found himself in the inner city.

Greenworth looked a lot better inside the walls, with quite a few people walking the streets. Zac had been worried from the missive he bought, but it at least looked like food wasn't an issue in the town, as most people were fed.

The aura of the villagers itself was a bit different from New Washington, as far more people wore different types of leathers and armor instead of old-world clothing here. If the government headquarters held on to the past, then the villagers of this town rather embraced the new.

As he kept pushing forward, he could finally confirm that his old neighborhood was included in this section of Greenworth and hadn't been teleported somewhere else. His footsteps sped up along with his heartbeat as he moved through familiar streets, both anticipation and fear filling him.

Soon he was just a blur for any onlooker as he sped toward the house where his father and sister lived. He'd moved out almost a decade ago, but Kenzie still lived at home since she was ten years younger than him, and he hoped he'd find both of them there. Finally, he found himself on their street, and it felt like his heart would jump out of his chest at any time.

He stopped outside a nondescript one-story house with a decent-sized yard. A dogwood tree stood proudly on the front lawn, and Zac saw it had grown noticeably bigger since the integration. However, as he looked upon the house, he felt some trepidation. There was no movement within, and it was quite clear that no one had lived inside for some time.

The door stood ajar, and a few windows had been destroyed. No smoke came out of the chimney either. With a sinking feeling, Zac found his courage after a bit and walked inside.



“Dad? Kenzie?” he tentatively asked, but only silence greeted him.

The ground was covered in dust and mud. Someone had walked through his home, haphazardly dragging dirt everywhere. Clearly, the house had been looted in the same way he’d seen before, and he couldn’t stop a flame of rage blazing up in his heart.

He quickly scanned the whole house and found no trace of either Kenzie or his father. Some things such as clothes and computers were missing, and the gun safe in his father’s bedroom was cracked open as well. However, most things were as he remembered.

As a last resort, he went down to the basement and lifted a floorboard under a mat. It was his father’s secret compartment, where he put important documents. To his surprise, he found a box inside he didn’t recognize. He opened it up and found a small notebook and a necklace.

“To Zac and Kenzie” was written on the front, and Zac’s eyes immediately started reddening. With unsteady hands, he opened it up and found it was a small diary, apart from the first page.

*If you found this, I may not be around anymore. I pray that you are safe and sound in this crazy new world, and that you take care of each other. You were my light and my dream. Love, Robert.*

*PS. The necklace is a memento from your mother. It may help you find her if you wish to do so.*

Zac had to close his eyes and take a few steadying breaths before he opened his eyes again. This wasn’t a good sign, but he wouldn’t give up hope just yet. The notepad might have been left here long ago.

However, as he read on, that hope was dashed as the diary detailed what had happened after the integration. Everything had turned black after a voice said, “Welcome to the Multiverse” in his father’s mind. When he woke up, he found that Kenzie was gone.

In just a few days, he found out that a lot of people, especially youth, had simply disappeared when the world got integrated. He kept searching all over Greenworth for Kenzie, also hoping Zac would return from his trip.

They discovered the System and levels and slowly started to power up. The weeks passed, and people were getting attacked by crazed wildlife. They formed groupings, and Robert became a leader of a group that strove to keep the area safe for civilians. He tried to keep his town protected as he kept searching for his children, until one day, people suddenly returned.

*With a flash, they stood there, people who had simply disappeared earlier. Thousands of the missing ones. They looked different, wearing medieval weapons and armor, and they emitted a dangerous air. I couldn't find you among them. But I heard there is a leader called Thom Sullivan who might know more. I am heading to him tomorrow with a few other leaders who have protected Greenworth. Hopefully, we'll learn more then.*

That was the last entry in the book. Zac felt completely empty inside, subconsciously knowing what it meant. He sat completely motionless for minutes, just staring at the last entry in the diary. Finally, he refocused, refusing to give up until he had proper confirmation.

He placed everything in the compartment into his Cosmos Sack and immediately left the house. He would make a quick stop at his own apartment first just in case. It was on the third floor and much safer than living in a house with beasts lurking about, and he hoped his father had moved there.

The diary gave most of the information about what had happened. It turned out that Kenzie was a cultivator, but his dad wasn't. The troubling thing was how the diary simply ended with his dad visiting this Thom Sullivan. Months of accumulated anxiety was quickly turning into rage as Zac hurried toward his apartment. If that Thom guy had done anything to his family, he'd better pray for a quick death.

He quickly arrived at his apartment complex and, like a gust, arrived in front of his door. He still carried his key in one of his pouches, so he took it out and opened the door and walked inside.

He only took a few steps before his eyebrows furrowed, and he sprinted forward. A gangly youth in his late teens was standing in his apartment, wearing his clothes, gaping in shock at Zac.

“Who the fuck are you?” Zac growled as he held the youngster up in the air by his scruff.

“Please don’t kill me! I’m Ryan! I just squat here. Take anything you want!” the guy screamed in fear.

Zac calmed down a bit and used [**Eye of Discernment**] on him. His name truly was Ryan, and he was level 18. Zac let him down on the ground, and he collapsed in a heap on the floor.

“Why are you in my apartment?” Zac simply asked.

“Your apartment? Wait... You’re Zachary! I almost didn’t recognize you at first!” Ryan answered, quickly getting excited.

“Do you know me?” Zac asked skeptically, as he’d never seen the youth before.

“Well, yes and no... I’ve lived here for two months. I saw a window was open, so I climbed up and got in. Then I found a spare key. I’ve sort of... gone through your things?” he said, his voice getting a bit lower at the end as Zac’s brows furrowed.

“Wait, wait, don’t get angry; you know how it is. No internet, no electricity, no TV. The days get slow. So I started looking through everything. Like your mail and photo albums and stuff,” Ryan said. “I even visited your dad’s house. I’m sorry about him. He seemed like a good guy.”

“What do you mean?” Zac spoke through gritted teeth, the foreboding feeling in his chest just getting worse.

“You don’t know? Ah... well... I’m sorry, but he was... killed,” the youth said with some hesitation.

It felt like an explosion went off in Zac’s mind, but he forced himself to refocus on Ryan.

“After we returned from the Tutorial, a few cultivators wanted to seize power over the town. There’s a chance to become Lord if you do that, and people want to be the ruler ’cause you apparently get all kinds of benefits. So Thom and the others killed the mortals who had started organizing people, not allowing any other factions to crop up. Those guys are crazy, and the government is only looking the other way,” he explained with fear mixed with disgust.

Zac’s breathing was getting heavier and heavier, but there was another question that needed to be answered before he turned to action.

“I have a sister,” Zac said as he took out a picture he had taken from his old house. “Do you know where she is? She’s a cultivator.”

“Mackenzie? I think she’s in one of the other cultivator groups. I never saw her in the Tutorial. There were quite a few people, but we were stuck together for a month. I’m pretty sure I’d have seen her if she was there,” Ryan quickly answered, inching away from Zac, clearly still afraid.

Zac only glared at him for some time and even took out **[Verun’s Bite]**.

“I swear I’m telling the truth! She really wasn’t there. You should thank god for that, since young beautiful girls don’t have a good time in this town,” Ryan stuttered from Zac’s oppressive stature.

Zac could at least breathe a sigh of relief that Kenzie might still be alive. But relief soon returned to a burning rage that kept growing with every breath.

“Where is Thom Sullivan now?” he asked between gritted teeth.

“Thom? What are you planning?” Ryan asked skeptically.

“What am I planning? You’ll soon see for yourself,” Zac tersely answered as a monstrous aura filled with bloodlust flooded out from him, shaking the very foundations of the structure they stood in.

## JUDGMENT

Zac walked barefoot through the streets, looking like a thundercloud given human form. The air distorted around him as torrential amounts of Cosmic Energy ran amok through his pathways. He was making a beeline for the core of the town, where a second wall was erected around what was formerly a posh neighborhood.

His mind was of a singular purpose as he moved forward, guided by the description from Ryan. There were no what-if moral conundrums at the moment, only a seething rage. The thought of his father being cut down by some cultivator as he was trying to find Kenzie and him was almost enough to drive him insane with anger, and he had trouble concealing his aura at the moment.

In the distance, the gates appeared, guarded by a small group of what appeared to be soldiers, each armed with an assault rifle. Zac didn't stop as he moved forward, which alerted the guards, who lifted their guns as they closed the gates.

“Halt! This is private government property. Entrance is prohibited,” one of them shouted at him, but Zac's mind was clouded by rage, and he pushed forward.

The guards didn't hesitate and opened fire at him when he came within thirty meters of the gate, but Zac simply activated his movement skill. He was pretty sure he'd survive the weapons, but didn't want to try it out at the moment. He moved like a phantom, and within a second, he was right among the guards with **[Verun's Bite]** in his hands.

A few quick swings left a pile of bisected corpses and a pool of blood as he turned toward the large wooden gate. Zac simply walked up to it and infused his fist with the Seed of Heaviness and Cosmic Energy and, with a guttural growl, punched it.

It was as though a bomb had exploded as Zac's fist hit the gate. The force destroyed the hinges and pushed the door, or rather, the splinters that were left of it, inward. Shrapnel flew tens of meters in all directions like a fragmentation grenade.

Zac's anger was still at its peak as he walked through the wreckage and found himself on a mostly clean and well-maintained street. A quick glance around let him see a fleeing middle-aged man, and with a few steps, he caught up and grabbed him by the neck.

"Where are Thom Sullivan and the four other councilmen?" he asked with a growl.

"Don't kill me! They should be at the meeting with Mayor Whitfield at his mansion," he hurriedly said.

Mayor Whitfield was the highest government official in the town and, according to both Ryan and the information missive, corrupt through and through. As long as the cultivators provided him with a lavish lifestyle, he let the cultivators run rampant in the town, shielding them from any repercussions.

"Lead me there, and you can live," Zac said, still holding the man by his neck.

The man was eager to please and immediately pointed the direction. Zac continuously used his movement skill, which seemed to almost make his captive pass out. A quick walk later led him to a huge compound composed of three sprawling mansions.

"The house to the right is for business meetings, and they should be in there. The middle is his home, and the left one is... for his activities," the man said hesitantly between heaves.

Zac nodded and threw the man away after knocking him out. With a few steps, he was at the right house, but just as he was about to destroy the door and walk in, he was fired upon by multiple hidden soldiers.

A stinging sensation on his neck finally confirmed that he was bulletproof. Still, the bullets from the AR-15s hurt almost as much as a bee sting when they hit his bare skin. Zac quickly incapacitated the soldiers with a few throws of daggers from his pouch. Since he'd looted the mountain, he had hundreds and hundreds of throwing knives, and he didn't even bother to gather them up.

He had somewhat regained rationality by now and tried to avoid causing any more undue casualties. These soldiers weren't the real perpetrators and perhaps didn't deserve a death sentence. Still, whether they survived or not would likely depend on how quickly they got medical assistance, going by the damage he'd caused.

There were more soldiers inside the house, but Zac was unstoppable. After a short while, it was clear that the soldiers had had enough and weren't about to throw their lives away, so they started to avoid him instead. Zac welcomed their retreat and kept moving through the building, and it was as though a storm swept through the house until he found a large ballroom that had been refitted into a meeting room.

Just as he slammed open the door and entered, a sword imbued with freezing energy whooshed toward his head as an arrow flew straight toward his heart. Even the floorboards deformed and turned into spears aiming toward his guts, and some heavy mental pressure descended on him.

Zac was relieved since the attacks meant that his targets still hadn't fled. He readjusted his grip on **[Verun's Bite]** and slammed it at the incoming sword. The sword was immediately cut in two, and the axe continued unimpeded right into the head of a dour-looking man hiding right around the edge of the door. His scalp and brain went flying as the axe finished its trajectory, blood staining an expensive-looking painting hanging on the wall.



Zac simply ignored the other three attacks as he proceeded into the ballroom. They couldn't even impede him or leave a mark on his clothes, as Zac knew that none of the leaders in the town were even Rankers. He looked around and saw seven men with either fear or anger on their faces. Four of them were the cultivator councilmen, with the fifth lying dead behind him. Another man was the mayor, accompanied by what looked like two deputies.

There were also about a dozen young girls in various states of undress, who had fled to a corner. The table was laden with all sorts of foods and liquors, and by all accounts, Zac felt he had walked into a bacchanalia rather than a government meeting.

From the descriptions he possessed of the council, every one of his targets was accounted for, which was a great relief to him. From his quick scan, he knew this would be a quick and dirty slaughter. He was a bit disappointed, as he'd almost hoped for an epic battle to vent his anger. But crushing the council like dried twigs worked as well.

Zac slowly walked through the room, each of his steps causing a deep thump that echoed through the room. Each step was as though a hammer was forcing a nail into everyone's chests. It only got worse as an inhuman aura started emerging from Zac's body, the very air around him distorting. Waves of power billowed out and inundated the room in suffocating murderous intent. The large windows in the room shook, and it felt like an earthquake.

Most of the girls could barely remain standing, and the faces of the men visibly paled. Zac slowly moved forward like inevitable doom, and his eyes stopped on a swarthy black-haired man with a large beard and a thick hammer. Thom Sullivan. Zac was just about to go to work when someone finally managed to speak up.

"Who are you? Salvation? Why are you doing this?" one of the cultivators squeezed out through clattering teeth.

Zac only looked into his eyes for a few seconds, remembering his father. Perhaps he'd stood in this very room

when he was killed by the men in front of him.

“Salvation? No, I am judgment.”

“Judgment? You are making yourself an enemy of the government with your brazen actions. If you surrender yourself now, th—” the fat middle-aged mayor managed to wheeze out, but was abruptly interrupted by a dagger slamming into his gut, throwing him into the wall next to the scared girls.

“The government won’t mind me killing trash like you all,” Zac said as he looked over the perpetrators of his father’s death. “Every debt has a debtor. The day you slaughtered innocent civilians to take control of Greenworth, you accepted the fact that one day someone like me could arrive.”

He said no more, and he winked out of existence as he pushed [**Loamwalker**] to its maximum. A growl and whooshing of air was heard as one of the men by the table was cut in two, his upper torso slamming into the wall with a wet thud. The growls of Zac’s axe kept echoing in the room as body parts kept getting chopped off, Zac’s figure barely registering in the eyes of the helpless onlookers.

The rulers of Greenworth desperately tried to flee or mount resistance, but it was a joke in front of Zac’s wrath. It was not a battle, it was a slaughter. Their attacks were even weaker compared to the ants back on the island, and as soon as someone moved to flee, they were instantly slashed into multiple pieces.

In less than a minute, only Thom Sullivan and the mayor were left alive, though the mayor was barely conscious due to the dagger. When Zac had entered through the door, there had been some fight and brutality left in Thom’s eyes, but that was long gone, replaced with abject fear.

“Take the town. It’s yours! And I have treasure the townspeople and government have collected over the month. You can have it all. Just let me go!” the leader said, any semblance of might long gone.

Zac simply snorted as he charged up [**Chop**] far beyond his limit and swung down. The edge tore straight through the whole building as it fell down upon the leader of Greenworth.

In a last-ditch effort to survive, Thom erected a defense that almost looked like a prismatic diamond, but it was like paper in front of the enormous edge. The axe pushed down and completely destroyed the man, leaving only bits and pieces intact. The strike continued into the ground, tearing a huge jagged scar through the whole building.

There was no satisfaction or emotional relief from the deed, only a deep and soul-crushing emptiness. He was too late. If he'd left the island immediately, he might have been able to stop this. There was a small voice in him that told him that it wasn't true, but it was scant reprieve to his current pain.

New Washington and Greenworth were located almost in the heartland of Pangea, the new continent. Any body of water that could hold Zac's island was an insurmountable distance away. Still, his feelings weren't about logic.

Strained wheezing interrupted his train of thought, and he turned around with a frown. It was the mayor, who had managed to remove the dagger from his abdomen. The man had a surprisingly high Vitality, as he was still holding on, even with the huge pool of blood beneath him. However, he was sweating and panting, his face completely pallid.

"Help me. I have strong connections, I can tell the officials these men were corrupt, and I hired you to bring justice. You will become a government-sanctioned leader of the town," he wheezed out.

He was considering what to do about this man. He did not care one bit about his offer. He had no plans to take over this town, as it would likely completely make him fall out with the government. Besides, he wasn't sure if some sort of quest would trigger if he took hold of the Nexus Crystal, such as a test of sorts. He had no time or desire to fight beast hordes on two fronts.

He was planning to leave the town to the army and have the government decide a new leader. He had no desire to stay

on here since his father was dead and his sister somewhere else. That still left him with the mayor. From the man's actions, Zac felt he should be killed with the rest of the cultivators, but he was a high official of the government.

He had already got off to a slightly rocky start with the leaders of New Washington, and he was reluctant to keep killing their people. There was still a hope that Port Atwood could cooperate with the rest of the world, and he felt that the government was a good tool for that.

Though they hadn't really tackled the invader threat as of yet, their progress in just four months was startling. They had created a network of towns, such as Fairfield, and were slowly starting to adapt to the new world. Perhaps their speed was too slow, as Zac knew the invaders weren't lazing around.

The invaders were simply preparing and accumulating while they waited for the limiters to lift, after which they would explode in violence. The reports he'd read in the information crystal from Ogras were truly horrifying, and humanity wasn't really prepared.

Still, with the help of him and the demons, humanity's odds of surviving and reclaiming the world would be a lot higher. With him and a few other Rankers taking the lead, they could keep the leaders under control. Zac knew that none of the invaders would be able to break through to E-grade yet due to the System still restricting them.

That gave the defenders a window of opportunity to clear out the incursions before their power started to get out of hand. Zac finally decided to keep the man alive and bring him to the government. Their handling of this criminal would also be a good gauge of how they did things.

However, fate has a sense of humor, as just a second after Zac decided what to do, one of the scared girls in the corner leaped forward with a broken-off piece of wood in her hand. With an almost feral snarl, she stabbed it straight in Mayor Whitfield's throat.

The man tried to defend himself, but between him losing most of his blood and the boundless anger of the girl, it was to

no avail. She kept slamming the wooden spike down into the body, creating grisly wounds, most centered around his groin. There was no coming back from that, pill or no pill, and he simply bled out in a matter of seconds.

“Uh...” was all Zac could think of saying as he looked at the panting woman in front of him.

## RECRUITMENT

Zac was stumped, even forgetting his pain for a second as he saw the heaving girl standing over the mangled corpse of the mayor. It looked like turning him over wasn't an option anymore. The other girls in the room were also staring blankly at their companion and the man who likely had been the source of no small amount of grief.

Not sure what else to do, Zac sighed and walked over to the government worker and put the mangled corpse into his Cosmos Sack. The girl warily looked at him, her eyes widening a bit at the magical display of the pouch.

“When these cultivators returned from the Tutorial, they killed a group of townspeople who defended Greenworth after the integration. Do you know what happened with the bodies?” Zac asked as he looked up at the girl still wielding a piece of shrapnel.

She appeared to be somewhere around her twenties and was quite beautiful. In fact, all of the girls in the room were, and their skimpy clothing did nothing to hide their curvaceous bodies. However, their eyes quickly told anyone that they were not willingly standing in this house, as they were hard as stone, marred by whatever they had experienced in the past months. No one said anything for a while, until a small voice from the back row of women could be heard.

“They... They were buried to the north side of the inner wall. There was a park there before, but it has turned into a cemetery for those the council killed,” the young girl finally answered.

Zac nodded and turned to leave.

“Wait!” the woman with the makeshift weapon suddenly shouted after him.

Zac didn't really want to deal with these girls, as his mind still was on his father's remains.

“You can all leave. I will talk to the leaders of New Washington and have them send a proper mayor here,” he said.

“That's not it. Take us with you,” she said with a somber expression.

That made Zac stop and turn around with a serious face. He once again looked over the group, this time using **[Eye of Discernment]**. As he suspected, none of the girls were strong, the highest being level 14. If they were powerful, they would not have been in their current situation, dressed as belly dancers or courtesans of a harem.

“I am sorry, but you are of no use to me. I need warriors, not more refugees.” Zac immediately shot her down.

“But you can train us! You must be a high Ranker from your aura and what you did in here. Thom was over level 30, but he was helpless against you,” she refuted.

“Train you? You are all barely level 10. Helping you attain a power that could contend against the forces of the world would take an immense amount of resources. Why should I do that?”

**[Joanna Andersson wishes to enter a Contract of Binding. Time: Indefinite. Accept?]**

Zac's brows rose as he saw the prompt appear in front of him. He knew about the Contracts of Binding from Calrin. None of the demons had actually mentioned it to him, even though they usually were his main sources of information. Zac assumed that they were afraid he would try to impose it on them in the future.

A Contract of Binding was more accurately named an employment contract. It made a person a subordinate who couldn't betray their employer. His orders would to a certain

degree become compulsions as well, unless giving a detrimental order, such as committing suicide or ruining their cultivation. That, of course, only was true for the type of employment. If he contracted this woman as a soldier, he couldn't order anything about her private life.

Furthermore, one essentially had to enter the contract willingly, and you could set the duration yourself. It was a normal method for clans in the Multiverse to make sure of the allegiance when hiring people, such as external warriors for war or exploration of a Mystic Realm.

But it could also be a tool to permanently bind a person to a force, as was the case with the prompt in front of him. The time was set to indefinite, and only Zac could rip up the contract and free the girl. The only other ways for her to regain her freedom was to reach a higher level than him or if he tried to harm her. Zac had thought about forcing this type of contract on the demons after hearing about it, but he'd learned that it was impossible for the same reason.

These contracts were useless on higher-leveled cultivators since they could break them at will, and pretty much all of the demons were higher level than him. It was simply that the restrictions on the invaders were still in place, making it easy to forget that almost all of them were at the bottleneck, working at either their Dao or their constitution in order to evolve. The System wanted to promote the strong, so it wouldn't allow the strong to be in servitude of the weak. Of course, Zac's power level was actually higher than the demons', but his situation was a bit unique.

Zac stared for some time at the woman, who apparently was called Joanna. She had a steely determination in her eyes that he hadn't even seen in Emily, who herself craved power.

“Are you sure about this? You will likely be sent to bloody battlefields, fighting both humans and aliens, if you follow me. And that is if you even survive training,” Zac said as he stared her down.

An idea was forming in his mind as he looked at Joanna and the others, but she alone wouldn't cut it.



“As long as you give me power, nothing else matters,” she said, not flinching the slightest from Zac’s stare.

Zac finally accepted the prompt, feeling a mental connection forming. It was not like gaining another limb, just an additional awareness in the corner of his mind. He took out a spear and slammed it into the ground in front of her and then took out a female’s leather armor from his pouch.

“Don’t lose these. If you do, you’ll have to purchase new ones with your own money, and the amount of slaughter needed to afford them will probably kill you,” Zac said.

Joanna eagerly looked at the gear, and without hesitation, took off the little clothes she had on. Zac unashamedly looked on, reminded that it actually had been months since he’d been with Hannah. He forced himself to refocus as Joanna equipped the gear, and after some struggle, managed to pull out the spear from the ground.

With demon armor and a spear in her hand, her aura completely changed. She already had the steely gaze of a warrior, but now she had the appearance to match it. Of course, some weaponry didn’t change the fact that she still was a level 13 weakling, but she did look quite heroic.

“I am leaving Greenworth in two hours. The offer Joanna received stands for all of you. But let me make it clear. I am not offering you freedom. I am offering you power. You’re welcome to choose freedom instead and stay behind. Though you should know that things might get chaotic with both the mayor and the council dead. Those who wish to follow me gather with Joanna outside these mansions in two hours,” Zac said as he disappeared with his movement skill.

He quickly exited the house and found some soldiers hesitantly standing in the distance. They should have heard the commotion, and unless they were blind, they should have seen Zac’s final strike where he almost ripped the mansion in two. Zac frowned, not in the mood to start killing the soldiers. He wanted to avoid further bloodshed, already regretting massacring the warriors at the gate in his rage.

“We mean you no harm,” one of the older soldiers shouted from the distance. “We just need to know what’s going on. Scouts report of a beast horde arriving within the hour, and we need to prepare.”

“The council members are dead. The mayor is dead,” Zac simply said. “I will eradicate the horde for you, but after that, you’re on your own.”

None of the soldiers looked overly surprised by the news. Their captain simply nodded.

“There are over a thousand boars heading our way from the north. The council usually gathers outside the town to fight in order to avoid the destruction of property,” he simply said.

“I will join you in an hour,” Zac said as he disappeared, once again moving with **[Loamwalker]**.

He kept speeding away and soon reached the park that one of the former slave girls had mentioned. The area was filled with mounds of overturned earth, some graves old and some clearly made within the last week. All in all, there had to be hundreds of bodies buried across the area, giving it a gloomy atmosphere.

Zac had no idea which one of the mounds contained his father, so he could only walk along aimlessly. He noticed a large boulder lying some distance away and walked over to it. With six quick swings, a towering monolith was created that Zac lifted up with a grunt.

He walked over to the center of the park and placed it by an intersection of two somewhat overgrown paths. Using his inhuman power, he pushed it some ways into the ground, securing it in place. Seeing it was stable, he carved two simple lines in the monument.

*Gone but not Forgotten*

*Rest in Peace*

Afterward, he simply sat down, reminiscing about the past. The park was empty except for himself and his thoughts, and there was a heaviness in the silence. It was as though it blended with the heaviness in Zac’s heart and became a

palpable thing around him. If a human walked close to Zac at this moment, it wouldn't be surprising if they were physically impacted by the mood.

Zac didn't move as one memory after another flitted through his mind. Finally, he opened up his eyes after roughly an hour. He sighed and got to his feet and took one last glance around.

"I promise I'll find Kenzie if it's the last thing I do," he said as he lightly touched the monolith.

With that, he pushed north, to help out his hometown one last time. With neither his father nor sister around, he honestly didn't care too much about Greenworth. He didn't really have any close friends anymore, rather co-workers and acquaintances. His closest friend had died four years ago, long before the integration, and he'd never really looked for new ones after that.

Still, it was the town he grew up in, and where most of his childhood memories were. Even if it wasn't really the same town anymore, he didn't want to see it fall to some boars. He knew the soldiers likely could take care of it, but it cost bullets. By now, it should take quite a few munitions to destroy a horde of wild animals, as their Endurance kept increasing. He didn't know how much reserves the army still possessed, and he didn't want the townspeople to suffer due to his actions earlier.

After running for about ten minutes, he saw the battlefield ahead. There were simple defenses erected, but from experience, he saw that it wasn't really enough to impede a beast wave. He walked up toward the man who had spoken to him back by the mansion, who nodded at him.

"The beasts should arrive in five minutes. We're making our stand here. Luckily, there's no high-level beast amongst their kind; the largest boar is roughly four meters high and level 43. We will likely have to use grenades on it, as bullets seldom work against the ones that size," the soldier reported.

"No need for all that. Just stay here, and I'll be back in a bit," Zac said.

With that, he pushed out toward the forest in the distance, using [**Loamwalker**] to increase his speed even further. After one minute of rushing, he saw the horde approach, and he relished the chance for some no-holds-barred unthinking carnage.

## ARMY

The soldiers looked on, horrified, as Zac returned just five minutes later, covered head to toe in blood. He still wore the cape above his usual robe, and it didn't have the self-cleaning option.

"It's done," Zac tersely said as he passed the captain without stopping.

"Are you staying in Greenworth?" the captain hesitantly asked Zac, who kept moving toward the town.

"No, I am heading to New Washington in an hour," he answered.

The soldiers looked both relieved and troubled at the same time as Zac disappeared. There were a few things he wanted to do before leaving. First, he went to a deserted home and cleaned up and changed clothes.

After that, he went back to their old house and put everything of sentimental value into a pouch. He also left a note for Kenzie under the floorboard, explaining what had happened here and where she could find him. For all he knew, Kenzie might be trying to get home as well, and this note would hopefully send her to Port Atwood if she passed by.

Next, he went back to his own apartment. Ryan was still there, fretfully hiding. When he saw Zac walk through the door, he looked quite startled.

"You're alive! It's a good thing you came back. Those guys are extremely dangerous. You'd better not do anything rash," he said with a sigh.

“They’re all dead, the council and the mayor. We’re leaving Greenworth, going back to my hometown,” Zac answered as he put most of his belongings away into the pouch.

“Dead? Wait, what? What’s going on? What do you mean WE’RE leaving?” Ryan said, seeming to have some trouble understanding the burst of information.

“You are the only one who knows my actual identity. That could be a risk for my sister. So either I kill you here and now, or you come with me to my hometown,” Zac answered as he stopped, turning toward the gangly man.

“Your place sounds great. A change in scenery is just what I needed,” Ryan answered, his head quickly nodding.

Zac rolled his eyes and threw one of his empty Cosmos Sacks over to the man.

“This is a Cosmos Sack; its value is around a million Nexus Coins. Take it as compensation for forcibly being relocated,” Zac said as he kept storing away his items. “Is there any place that has good terrain vehicles, such as jeeps?”

“I think those were mostly confiscated by the council and a few other powerful cultivators. It’s pretty much needed if you want to get to New Washington in one piece,” Ryan distractedly answered as he fiddled with the pouch.

“Right. Do you know if any of my neighbors are still alive?” Zac asked.

“I’m not sure. This apartment complex is within the outer walls now, but before the wall was built, monsters roamed freely on the streets. I think only something like a third of the whole town is still alive, if even that,” Ryan answered with a sigh.

The answer gave Zac a start. He had been preoccupied by his quest to find his family, but now that he thought about it, there seemed to be quite a few people missing, and it wasn’t something that missing cultivators or the randomized missing areas could explain.

Only the core of Greenworth was walled in, while the outside was exposed to all kinds of beasts. As he'd sped through the outer part, it was mostly abandoned, apart from the occasional scavenger. Less than a third of the population could actually fit inside the walls, judging by the area it encircled. But it didn't seem cramped at all; rather, the opposite.

It was a sobering feeling knowing that so many of the people he had seen growing up were just gone. Old classmates, co-workers, even random people on the streets. Most of them were simply dead, many likely suffering terrible fates. Zac worked silently, subdued by a gloom, as he finished packing.

"Let's go. We're picking up some more things before we leave," Zac said as he made for the door.

Ryan didn't really seem to own many possessions, as he was still dressed in Zac's old clothes, so he quickly scampered behind him after safely tucking away his Cosmos Sack. Zac simply knocked on the door of some of his neighbors he was closer to, but only silence answered. He eventually shook his head and moved on.

They turned toward the core area with the inner wall, and Ryan started to get fidgety as they approached.

"Hey, buddy, I know you are powerful and all, but the army is up there. You might be able to dodge the bullets like some action hero, but I can't," he hesitantly said.

"What did you do in the Tutorial anyway? You got this huge opportunity to gain power and survive, but you're spending your days hiding in my apartment," Zac scoffed with a roll of his eyes.

"Hey! I'm still decompressing from that nightmare. You know the horrors we had to go through. I'm just happy I made it out alive. Besides, I'm still thinking about my true calling, trying to find my way, you know? After that, I'll start leveling again."

Zac simply snorted in response. Ryan's excuses sounded much like the ones he'd heard from many in the old world who didn't want to work but only play around.

Of course, there was no guard that challenged his approach this time, and they freely entered the posh neighborhood. The army was clearly uncomfortable to just let him go about as he wanted, but also unwilling to get too close out of fear of getting cut apart like the boars, so a few people shadowed them but kept a respectful distance.

Zac used them for directions, and with their help, he snatched up a group of vehicles that would be able to run in rougher terrains. He simply threw them into his larger Cosmos Sack, which had no problem accommodating them. He planned to bring them back to Port Atwood.

His town had the advantage of housing the demons, who had far greater experience with crafting. He hoped that perhaps they could modify the vehicles to run on crystals rather than gas. If the refit was somewhat simple, it could become another export of the town.

Soon it was time to meet up with Joanna, so Zac went straight to the open space in front of the mansion. To his surprise, it was filled with women, far more than the dozen or so who were at the meeting. A quick count put them at over one hundred people. All of them wore wretched clothing and had haggard expressions, but it was clear that all of them were young, beautiful women.

The regret over the mayor's death was quickly fading as he looked out over the victims of the apocalypse with a frown. Who knew what humiliation they had been forced through in the past months. Besides, his little sister might have been one of the victims if she hadn't been whisked away, and he could only pray she had found the power to protect herself in the Tutorial.

But these women were just like Joanna, hardened through suffering and desperate for power. They were completely different from the mostly useless refugees who had appeared on his island. And Zac could use the manpower. He needed a



private army. Everything looked fine with the demons on the surface, but he knew that he couldn't trust the protection of his town to them alone. There needed to be a counterbalance apart from just himself on the island. The demons possessed their own interests, and Ogras was a duplicitous character.

Besides, even if these girls entered a Contract of Binding with him, it wasn't like he could or would use it for some nefarious purposes, and he'd release them when his force was stabilized. He looked at it the same way as most powers of the Multiverse, just a contract to make sure that he didn't get stabbed in the back after pouring large amounts of resources into their training.

It was becoming increasingly clear to him that women were generally having a worse time in this new world compared to men. Neither gender really had any advantage or disadvantage when it came to cultivation or getting stronger, but scum like the mayor were simply far more common among men.

He doubted that there were too many female powerhouses who were catching hundreds of young handsome men to trap in their sex dungeons. These girls weren't useless when it came to cultivation or fighting; it was just that they'd gotten left behind in the early race for power, which left them helpless against people like Thom.

Their eyes reminded him of himself when he'd been stuck alone on the island, feeling weak and hopeless as he fretfully huddled in his camper while listening to the roars in the woods. Hopefully, they could turn that helplessness and anger into a desire for strength, turning them into a real force with the right training.

The main problem with a lot of people was that many didn't seem to keep pushing themselves after an initial burst of activity, after which they started to feel safe again. However, safety was just an illusion. He had already seen multiple ghost towns while traveling through the area to Greenworth. They were small encampments with basic fortifications just like in Fort Roger.

One or a few cultivators simply didn't have the power to contend with the increasingly hostile wildlife unless they went out of their way to grind levels in between the beast attacks. Just idling around like some kings in between short bursts of monster hunting would only work in the short run. Some of the citizens would be able to migrate to larger and safer towns; however, many would die during the travels.

At least these women in front of him seemed driven enough to keep pushing themselves forward if they were given the chance now. And if they started slacking off, he had the contract to push them forward. He walked over to Joanna, who looked very conspicuous with her spear.

"Who are all these people? How come there are far more people compared to before?" he asked as he looked around.

"Half were kept by the mayor; the rest were split among the council," she answered with smoldering anger barely concealed beneath her calm façade. "When they heard about your offer, they wanted to join."

"Is it true you can make us powerful? Strong enough to slaughter assholes like Thom?" a girl, looking about the same age as his sister, asked skeptically.

Zac looked over the field, and the same skepticism could be seen on many of the faces looking at him. He looked over to Joanna, who silently stood beside him.

"Are these mansions empty?" he asked her.

She looked confused but immediately answered, "Yes. No staff dared stay there, and all captives were freed," she said, after which she pointed at a pile of sacks. "We removed anything of value as well."

Zac nodded and walked over to the pile and, with a flourish, put them all into a Cosmos Sack, which elicited a few surprised murmurs. But he wasn't done here, as he felt he needed to display some of his power if he wanted to recruit these people.

He unleashed his aura in its entirety, and it billowed out among the onlookers. By now, he had calmed down, and it

only contained his power, and the murderous intent was far less discernible. Screams and gasps echoed across the square, and many even fell on their knees, clutching their heads. With two quick steps, he arrived at the gate of the old mayor's mansion and charged up three fractal edges with [**Chop**].

In a lightning-quick manner, he made three wide horizontal swings, and just before the fractals flew off, he imbued them all with the Dao of Heaviness. The fractals flew toward one of the mansions each and, with the help of the Dao Seed, completely destroyed the buildings from the impact. It looked like a terrorist attack, where a few bombs were simultaneously set off. Rubble flew in all directions, and many had to take cover to avoid the falling debris.

He removed his aura and once again glanced at the group, whose skepticism was now replaced with fear.

“I will tell you the same as I told Joanna. I can give you power. But power comes through walking over the corpses of your enemies. If you don't believe me, take a look at this,” Zac said with a loud voice reaching across the square as he opened up his title page and shared his [**Butcher**] title, which showed he'd killed over a hundred thousand beings.

Another round of gasps was heard, and Ryan even edged away from him with horror in his eyes.

“Since the world turned to shit, I've been attacked in all kinds of ways. I've been stabbed, maimed, mauled, and suffocated. I've been blasted with fireballs and mental shockwaves and struck by lightning bolts. But I've survived, and I've become strong.

“You all have the potential to become powerful, but you need the willpower and determination to fight, and keep fighting. The second you stop struggling, someone like Thom will pass you in power. I can only provide you with an opportunity, but your effort will decide whether you will become a hunter or the hunted,” Zac said.

“If you decide to follow me, you will become a part of my army, and we will immediately set out to New Washington. From there, we'll teleport to the home base of the force I

belong to, and there your training will begin in earnest. If you can't keep up during the walk, I'll leave you in the woods.

"I won't force anyone to follow me. You have five minutes to make your choice: power or freedom," he finished as he summoned a chair and sat down.

There was a subdued silence as he looked upon the women. The silence stretched to a minute until it finally was broken by the young girl who'd questioned him earlier. She walked right up to him with steady steps.

"I choose power," she said with determination in her eyes as a Contract of Binding popped up in front of Zac.

He nodded as he took out another set of gear and a spear and handed it over. With the first person walking forward, it was as though a blockage was removed, and the former slaves walked forward one by one to pledge allegiance and get a set of gear.

With that, the first battalion of the Atwood Valkyries was born.

## THE RETURN

Zac kept the lead as he pushed through the woods, his battalion of hapless recruits behind him. All together, eighty of the women had signed up, and were now walking behind him through the wilderness. The last thirty or so decided to stay behind in Greenworth, and Zac wouldn't waste any more energy on them.

Luckily, the gear he'd pilfered from Rydel and the dead warriors was enough to outfit everyone to look essentially the same, with leather armor and a spear. Some of the gear was bloodied or had some scratches, but there was nothing to do about that at the moment.

He was quite surprised to hear that nine of the recruits actually were cultivators who possessed experience from the Tutorial. However, they had been in the bottom tier and emerged with even lower levels compared to Ryan. Being a cultivator didn't guarantee safety, and they'd been captured soon after they were returned. Apparently, there were safety measures against that in the Tutorial, but it disappeared immediately after it was over.

The fledgling soldiers had the willingness but lacked the skill as they stumbled along. Many were already panting from the trek while carrying their weapon. Zac could have put the heavy gear back in a pouch, but he saw it as an opportunity for them to train and learn to struggle. They should be able to get a few stat points on the way to New Washington this way.

He was also accompanied by Ryan, who for some reason, looked the most wretched of the bunch, even though having

both the highest level and a Cosmos Sack to carry his things.

“This is torture. Why don’t we take a break?” he coughed out between pants.

“Just how have you survived until now?” Zac asked, part despising, part curious. The man truly seemed to have no survival skills apart from some quick wits.

“I mean, I loved reading and watching zombie stories before the world turned crazy. So I treated the merge like that, you know? Gather cans of food, scavenge while making no sound, things like that,” he answered with some pride.

“The world will keep getting more dangerous. We got upgraded to a D-grade world. Sooner or later, a bunch of E-grade monsters will roam about, perhaps even D-grade behemoths. How are you going to survive if you run around at level 18?” Zac asked.

“Well, I’ve got people like you for protection, right?” he answered without hesitation.

Zac was about to refute it, but with a start, he actually realized Ryan made some sense. It was the job of people like him to protect the town so that the noncombat classes could work and make the area thrive. He also realized that he had developed somewhat of a harsh attitude to those who couldn’t battle lately, and it was something he needed to work on if he was going to lead a force that likely would consist of more noncombat personnel than warriors.

He glanced back at the troop and saw that they should be able to keep going some more. He’d gotten pretty good at understanding the limit of endurance after battling the hordes. If people were sweating and panting, they had more to give, but if they were glassy-eyed and robotic in their movements, they were at their limit.

He was also happy to see that they seemed to be quite united. When one stumbled, someone close by would help her up. Unity in a troop was extremely important. It was true before the fall and perhaps even more so now. A soldier

needed to be able to rely on their squad mates. Now, with the System, there was also the issue of War Arrays.

Alyn had explained the reason there were armies in the Multiverse. Zac had some problem understanding before since he felt that any old D-grade monster was enough to decimate an endless number of F-grade soldiers, making them worthless. But there was such a thing called War Arrays. They were part array and part skill. A troop would combine their power and exhibit a strength far above their individual power, even eclipsing ranks sometimes.

He didn't possess such a thing at the moment, but the simpler ones shouldn't be too hard to get hold of, especially with his cash infusion from the pouches on the mountain.

With such a large group moving, they were almost constantly beset with attacks. Zac kept using [**Eye of Discernment**], and if the beasts were low-leveled, he let the girls fight them. He only put his finger on the scale to make sure there were no deaths.

However, after half a day of walking, most of the new recruits had bleeding gashes and bites hastily wrapped with some cloth or even leaves. There were even quite a few who had leveled up during the day. The first levels were quite quick, and thanks to Zac maintaining vigilance, they could keep fighting without worrying that some high-level beast would arrive.

There were a few of those huge beasts that attacked the group, thinking they were easy pickings. Zac simply crippled them with a swing or two and let someone from the army finish it off. Zac still got over 95% of the Cosmic Energy, but even 5% of a high-level beasts gave quite a boost to the women, who were barely level 10.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity for everyone except Zac, they stopped for dinner. Zac threw out two of the huge carcasses of the higher-leveled beasts and cut them into manageable chunks with a few quick swings.

“Everyone gather up,” he said.

The women were tired but moved up to him.

“There’s eighty of you, so we’ll create eight squads for now, ten per group. One squad will take care of the camp every time we stop, such as cooking, and the group will rotate. The rest of you will use these,” Zac said as he took out a small mountain of Nexus Crystals.

“What the HELL! Just how rich are you?” Ryan couldn’t help shouting as he saw the pile of wealth.

Zac ignored him as he looked over his new soldiers.

“My goal is for you all to gain one level every day during our march. It shouldn’t be too hard, since you’re all so low-leveled. For those who don’t know, these are Nexus Crystals. You can absorb the energy inside to gain levels. I want everyone except the squad in charge of the chores to use these every time we rest as a supplement to the battles while we walk,” he said.

“What about me?” Ryan said with some greed in his eyes.

“You want crystals? Join the army,” Zac simply said. Honestly, he had more than enough crystals to hand out a few, but he wouldn’t do it right after the eighty women in front of him essentially got drafted to get this opportunity.

“Um... never mind, then. I’ll just have something to eat,” Ryan muttered and slunk away.

Zac let the women divide themselves into groups since he knew it was all temporary in any case. He was pretty sure Alyn would rearrange it when they went back to the island.

He helped the chore group clean the large carcasses, as they generally still were too weak to cut through the tough hide of the high-level beasts. They could do it on low-leveled ones, but it was better if they all ate stronger beasts. It gave no Cosmic Energy, but it was far more nutritious compared to the normal animals.

As he was cleaning everything, Joanna walked up to him.

“Um... sir?” she tentatively asked Zac, who looked up at her.



“Yeah?”

“Well, some of us were wondering... who you are,” she asked with some embarrassment.

Zac simply stared blankly at her for some time, realizing he still hadn't introduced himself.

“It's not really important, really,” Joanna said, a bit flustered from Zac's blank stare.

“No, it's okay. Wait a second,” Zac said as he flashed next to Ryan. “Sorry about this.”

Ryan barely had time to register his words and let out a screech as a chop on his neck knocked him out cold. The sound woke up the people who were focusing on absorbing energy.

“My identity is a bit sensitive, so I had to knock this guy out. Since you all have signed a contract with me, there's no point in me hiding it. My name is Zachary Atwood, and I'm originally from Greenworth. My other nickname is... Super Brother-Man,” he said.

If Zac had to be honest, he expected some shock and awe, but was pretty disappointed. Some looked skeptical, some were surprised, and some looked like it was an obvious thing.

“Cough... well, that's about it,” he said with some embarrassment. “Keep both my identities secret. I'm known as Monk to the government. We're leaving in an hour. Rest up.”

“Wait, why do you have that weird name?” one of the girls suddenly asked.

Zac told them the story of the origin of Super Brother-Man and got many looks of approval. He still felt a bit embarrassed about the lackluster reaction earlier, so he sat down and closed his eyes as he took out another Nexus Crystal for himself.

He wasn't really focusing on the crystal, rather the feeling he had earlier at the grave site. The hour he sat reminiscing gave him an insight into another facet of Heaviness. He would treasure the insight, even though he didn't love the way he

gained it. He wasn't sure, but he felt it was the first clue to take the next step to upgrade his Dao Seed.

He knew that his seeds needed to improve quite a bit if he wanted an Epic class. Some low- or medium-ranked seeds wouldn't be enough, according to Alyn. He had already asked Calrin to be on the lookout for treasures that helped with the Dao, but those were among the most sought after treasures in the Multiverse. They were always in low supply but high demand, and the huge consortiums snatched them up long before people like Calrin had a chance to even see the listing.

As he was meditating, he sensed some light steps moving his way, and he was just about to open his eyes when he sensed more movement. Three of his new guards moved to intercept the person. He sneakily opened one of his eyes and saw one of the younger girls trying to approach him with a water bottle. Her efforts were foiled by Joanna and two of the girls who were cultivators, though.

Zac felt the whole thing worked out pretty great. He was in no mood for some girl trying to woo him for benefits. Besides, he knew he wouldn't get too close to these people. They would become soldiers, and many of them might be dead in a year or two. To defy fate and grasp for power was to dance with death; there was no getting around that.

Soon the hour was up, and Zac opened his eyes and got up. The recruits still weren't rested, but they got up to their feet with no complaint. Ryan was still knocked out where Zac had left him, so he splashed some water on his face to wake him up.

"Wha-whu? What the hell, man?" he groggily spluttered.

"You must have passed out. It's time to go," Zac said, hiding some embarrassment as he started walking again.

The days passed as the girls went through a baptism of fire and blood in the forest. Some even managed to attain a few of the solo-kill titles while fighting some of the weaker beasts. When they followed Zac out through Greenworth, the only thing strong about them was the determination in their eyes. But now they exuded an aura of warriors. Zac knew that they

were still only paper tigers and not someone who would be useful in the third wave, but their progress was impressive.

After roughly a week on the road, they reached the area of New Washington, and Zac sighed as he saw a group waiting for him by the gate. He wasn't surprised, as he'd spotted a few scouts in hiding earlier. He hadn't done anything to intercept them, as this wasn't avoidable.

This was going to be a pain in the ass.

## THOMAS FISCHER

“Stay here. If they start firing at you, scatter and hide until I’ve incapacitated them. Joanna, Riley, and Tamira with me. Ryan too, I guess,” Zac said, not wanting to give the man an opportunity to slink away.

“Um, I can keep lookout from over here. No need to bother you,” Ryan said as he nervously looked at the armed soldiers lined up, but after a glare from Zac, he sighed and followed.

The other three, each a leader of one of the squads, followed Zac expressionlessly. They were the first to sign up to his employ, and among those who had improved the most during the death march back to New Washington.

All of them were around level 20 by now, which was a huge improvement compared to before. While none had gained the one level per day he’d hoped, they weren’t far off. It shouldn’t be more than two weeks until they could get their class after they got back to the island.

Zac walked in the front, ready to intercept any nervous soldier with a hair trigger. There were a few official-looking people in the front, Julia one of them. Another of them clearly was a general from his attire. The final man was in his late forties or early fifties.

He was clean cut and good-looking, looking very much like the politicians of old. He even wore a navy suit with a silk tie. However, intuition born from months of intense battles told Zac that he was no weak mortal, but at least decently strong.

There were a few more of them who hid further in the back with fear on their faces. The whole group held around a hundred people and formed quite a welcome for Zac's party.

"It is good to see you again, Mr. Monk, though I hoped it would have been under better circumstances. We have heard some troubling things from Greenworth," Julia said.

"Like a barefoot lunatic going on a murder spree, killing all the strongest warriors of the town, putting all the civilians at risk," the general gruffly added with a glare.

The three women behind Zac glared at the general, but he only balefully glared back. Zac slowly looked over the group and with a sigh removed the corpse of the mayor and threw it over.

"It was very disappointing seeing the lawlessness your government displayed just one town away from here. I arrive and find this animal has been capturing young women for slaves, filling large mansions equipped with disgusting torture devices. This apparently went on for months, where he was left to his own devices, protected by the army. Yet you stand here looking all self-righteous," Zac said with a calm face.

Julia frowned and looked at the women behind him and then to the small army in the distance, unsure what to say. However, the general didn't have the same problem.

"Bah, that's just your story. And even if it was true, since when was it up to you to be judge, jury, and executioner? You should have reported it to us, and we would have looked into it," the general angrily retorted.

"The information brokers in New Washington already knew about it, so there's no way you didn't. I have eighty victims with me as well who can testify. Of course, you could just ask anyone from Greenworth if you actually gave a shit, since the council's activities were no secret. There's a whole park filled with unmarked graves that's a testament to their wanton slaughter in the town," Zac spat back with an angry glare.

Memories of the mounds where his father had been dumped somewhere came back to him, and his temper started rising. He knew that these people were not to blame, since it was the cultivators who did it as soon as they got back from the Tutorial. Still, he had some trouble maintaining his cool.

“Monk wasn’t the one who killed that pig; it was me,” Joanna suddenly interjected from behind him.

“Well, there you have it, a confession,” the general said.

“Don’t mind her,” Zac said and then turned to Joanna. “You stay quiet for now.”

She looked like she wanted to interject, but she still chose to step back after throwing another scathing stare at the general.

“So is this why you have a squadron waiting for me outside your gates?” Zac asked.

Finally, the clean-cut man opened his mouth.

“A society cannot function without order, and the rule of law is the most basic of protections for the weak against oppression by the strong. These are chaotic times, and unfortunately, some chose to look out for themselves instead of the common good,” he said as he looked down on the mutilated corpse of the mayor.

“There will be an investigation regarding your activities in Greenworth, and if it turns out what you say is true, then that’ll be it. If they truly acted as you say, hiding behind the authority of the government while acting like tyrants, then they deserve their fates. If we find you are lying, then you and Port Atwood will be listed as terrorists and barred from this and any future government towns on threat of death,” he continued.

Zac simply nodded, not really worried about the latter threat. To him, it felt like something the government needed to do to save face. They couldn’t just let it go, as that would make them look weak. He was even prepared to pay some fine just to smooth things over, but things turned out even better than expected.

“However, I’m more curious about why you have brought an army to our doorstep. From what I can see, the quality of their gear is not trivial. What is your goal?” the man continued.

“I plan on taking these people back to Port Atwood immediately. I have taken the liberty of taking them in as refugees. I was worried about their fate staying here,” Zac said with a shrug of his shoulders.

“Are you not staying for the auction?” Julia suddenly asked.

“I plan on attending. I’ll go back and report and then return. I may bring someone back with me,” he answered.

He thought of having Sap Trang act as a village elder so he didn’t have to keep having these conversations, as it was a bit tiring. Mr. Trang was of simple origins, but he was wily, which might just be what was needed to deal with these bureaucrats.

The man in the suit, who clearly was some sort of leader, nodded in response. There was something about the man in front of Zac that felt familiar, but Zac couldn’t place his finger on it.

“By the way, who are you? Why do I recognize your face?” he asked with some doubt.

“I am Thomas Fischer, and I was once the Deputy Secretary of Defense. For now, I’m the leader of New Washington,” Thomas answered with a nod.

Now Zac realized he must have seen the man in some news article or on the television. The guy had once been a pretty high-ranked official. It even looked like he was a cultivator, judging from his aura. Zac reminded himself to be careful around this man, not letting himself be used as some sort of puppet. If there was one thing that was common among all high-ranked politicians, then it would be their ambition, and he had no idea what goals this man had for himself in this new world.

“And the president?” Zac asked. He hadn’t actually thought about it until now, but he wondered where the de facto

leaders had ended up.

“President Hughes, Vice President Clark, and much of the old executive branch unfortunately have passed away. We recently found out that the part of Old Washington with the Capitol and the White House was randomized to close proximity of a Zhix hive. We do not expect there to be any survivors,” he said with a sigh.

“However, their sacrifice will be avenged. Any attack on humanity will result in a thunderous response,” he added with a higher volume.

Many of the soldiers nodded in agreement, and Zac even heard a “damn right” from somewhere. Zac was overall pretty impressed with the man in front of him. It looked like the government could be in worse hands. Still, he seemed like a purebred politician, and everything he said and did likely was to maximize benefits and not a testament to what he truly believed.

At least the man seemed intent on working together for now, and swept away his problems with one fell swoop. Zac felt it was nothing odd by now, and it reminded him of the pragmatic mindset of Ogras. There was no benefit in clamoring for justice for some dead rapist; it was much more beneficial to keep a good relationship with a potential powerhouse.

“So can we go?” Zac said, wanting to get on with it. The scouting missions should be done as well, and Zac was curious to see what his four teams had discovered on the neighboring islands.

“Of course, but understand that your group will need to have an army escort for safety reasons. We can’t just have a hundred armed warriors running rampant inside the town,” Thomas answered.

Zac thought it over for a second before he nodded and turned to his three guards.

“Get the others. We’re heading home,” he said, and in short order, the small army of spearmen walked through the



town.

They still didn't give the air of a real army, as their ranks were a bit disorganized, but at least the women gave off an intimidating aura. Between the inscribed spears and the high-quality leather gear, they looked like real warriors, and the various wounds that covered them only heightened that impression.

They were accompanied by soldiers both in front and behind the squad. The soldiers weren't really hostile, but rather looked a bit curiously at the girls, and even a bit jealously at Zac. They were quickly ushered to the teleporter, and Zac stayed behind, letting the others enter first.

"Just exit the building and stay there. Oh, and stay calm; they won't hurt you," Zac only said, drawing confused glances from both the new recruits and the people of New Washington.

Finally, everyone except Zac had passed through, and he turned to the leaders of New Washington.

"Our first meeting was a bit bumpy, but I hope we can work together in the future. We're well aware that the invaders are our largest threat. As a sign of trust, I'll give you this treasure. It contains much information that will aid humanity in general. My hope is that the content will be made public to any forces that stand against the enemies of our new planet," Zac said as he threw over the crystal containing the information of the incursions.

It was the very same one Ogras had thrown at him long ago, and he'd kept it all this while. He knew all the content by heart by now, so he had no problem giving it to the people here. While some of their motives were suspect, he felt their desire to protect humanity was true. Furthermore, he had no desire to profit from this information, as his very planet was at stake.

"What's this?" Julia curiously asked as she snatched the crystal out of the air.

"It is an information package containing quite a bit of information regarding the incursions. It details both the forces

of the Multiverse and many other important facts that will help us anticipate the invaders' composition and strength. It was taken from the body of a high-ranking invader," Zac simply said, drawing surprised glances.

"Are the forces of Port Atwood fighting an incursion?" Julia quickly asked.

"I'm not at liberty to discuss our situation. See you in three days," Zac said with a small smile as he entered the teleporter.

The leaders of New Washington seemed to have follow-up questions, but Zac simply winked out of existence, cutting any questioning short.



## HOMECOMING

Zac appeared in the familiar teleportation house and immediately heard a ruckus. He grimaced and quickly walked outside to see what was going on.

The response of the demons was surprisingly quick, with over twenty of them standing at the ready to blast his new soldiers to high heaven. The former slaves looked shocked at the sight of the demons, but Zac was happy to see that they hadn't forgotten their training and had formed a decent defensive line.

"That's enough. These are new recruits of Port Atwood," Zac said as he stepped in between the two groups.

Luckily, the demons had followed his standing orders, not wantonly killing anything coming through the portal. The array was only possible to use with his permission, after all, so anything that came through should be an ally.

"You keep bringing young girls back to the island every time you leave. I'm starting to get jealous." A light voice drifted over from the group of demons as Alea stepped out.

She scrutinized the girls, who warily looked back at her.

"Well, they're pretty weak, but at least they're better than those from the ship," she said with a smile.

"Oh, you're not happy with the assessment? You want to test your mettle, little girl?" she added as she saw one of the cultivators in the new group glare angrily at her.

“That’s enough. Where is Alyn? These people need basic training. I want them at fighting capacity as soon as possible,” Zac said.

“I’ll take you there,” Alea answered as she walked up to his side while throwing a teasing smile at the girls behind him.

Zac knew she was mostly messing around and didn’t mind it as he started walking, following the poison mistress’ directions.

“Um... what’s going on? Why are there... demons here?” one of the squad leaders hesitantly asked as they moved toward the temporary town.

“Well, that isn’t really important. You can see it as they’re another foreign race sharing our new planet. Besides, there are humans here as well, just not that many,” Zac said, still respecting the demons’ wishes to stay incognito as much as possible.

“Can you update me on what’s been going on since I left?” Zac asked as he turned to Alea.

“Ogras is still in seclusion, absorbing the fruit,” she started, looking prepared for the question.

“There was almost no reconstruction needed from the ant wave. We have sent a few exploratory parties inside and killed off most of those still alive inside the hive. Unfortunately, those kills awarded no contribution points. Space inside has stabilized by now and is barely larger than the exterior. There are some interesting developments there, but I’ll let Alyn discuss that with you,” she said, drawing confused glances from the others.

“Okay, what about the exploratory missions?” Zac asked next.

“The last of them returned yesterday. Three of the vessels met no real troubles. Surprisingly, most of the islands around us are inhabited. Most are populated with humans, but two are comprised of beastmen, who seem to have a rudimentary grasp of the Dao of Technology. The parties mostly kept some distance from them apart from a few minor altercations or

meetings. However, the last group only had two survivors of the six crewmen. Apparently, they stepped on an island, and after walking a bit, they were assaulted by extremely aggressive insectoid beings,” she finished.

Zac was a bit surprised that there were so many encampments scattered around his island. The beastmen were obviously the Ishiate, and it sounded like the camps close to Port Atwood were those that were starting to industrialize before the integration. He was a bit curious to meet these beastmen, but he didn’t have time for that at the moment.

It was more troubling to hear that a neighboring island held a Zhix hive. Zac still knew very little about that race apart from the fact that they were even more hostile than the forces of the incursions. It was like having a crazy neighbor, never knowing when trouble would come knocking at your door.

“How far is the island with the Zhix? That’s the insectoid species,” Zac asked.

“It actually is one of the closest islands, just an hour or so away on your vessel to the northeast. It was the last island the group planned on visiting before returning,” Alea said with a sigh.

That was even worse news. It meant that the danger only increased further, and the Zhix might even land on his island without him noticing since almost all of the shoreline was unguarded. The last time, the humans were only intercepted, since they specifically sailed toward his shipyard.

He really needed some alert system and would take some time to look through the shop for something fitting, and even consult with Calrin if he didn’t find anything.

After ten minutes of walking, they reached a house some distance from the town encampment, roughly somewhere around where the academy would be located in the future. Still, the building looked very temporary, and the work done was mostly clearing out forest and smoothing out the ground.

A large area was covered in gravel, and it resembled an outdoor gym from the various boulders and contraptions there.

“I see you got me some more students after all. I had a feeling you would want to increase the population soon, and had a few people arrange this space for me,” Alyn said with a smile as she exited the house.

“Low levels, but decent attitude. They are lacking in bloodlust and ruthlessness, though, but that can be fixed. Not a bad first squadron,” she said after quickly glancing over the girls behind Zac and Alea.

“A few of them are cultivators, but the rest are mortals. I hope you can look over options for a good cultivation manual to give them,” Zac said.

After traveling with Ryan and the other cultivators for a week, he’d learned a lot about the Tutorial. They had all been shocked when they learned that he wasn’t actually a cultivator himself, rather a mortal.

Everyone who entered the Tutorial received the same low-tiered cultivation manual. It was without any element and not very powerful, but helped set a foundation to the pathway system that could later be changed into whatever pattern their class provided. To get a better and more suitable manual, they had to earn them.

The first day in the Tutorial was pretty relaxed. Everyone had been teleported to a large town and greeted by the workers of the System. They had gotten an orientation that explained what was going on and basic information about Cosmic Energy, the System, and the Multiverse.

Many were skeptical, but it was hard to refute what was said when it came from a flying pixie who showed examples of magic as she explained it. They were even stuffed with some propaganda, as it was explained they were the “chosen ones” and the hope of humanity. The mortals were essentially called lower life-forms by the pixies, not deserving of the System’s attention.

They were given the manual, which was simply called [**F-grade Cultivation Manual**], and taught how to meditate to absorb Cosmic Energy quicker. They were also given a choice of a skill, ranging from weapon skills to spells. From the

description of the skills, it sounded to Zac as if it was an improved selection of the beginner skills available for sale in the Nexus Node.

People had been amazed by suddenly being able to strike out with weapons with the power to create cracks in the ground, or even shoot fireballs. They were even given an exclusive title for being the “chosen,” which gave 5 points to all attributes, just to show them how the title system worked. However, the fun times didn’t last forever. Those 5 points also guaranteed that everyone, young or old, essentially was in peak condition for the following trials.

On the second day, everyone was teleported away from the town. Some arrived in some dingy cave, others in some sort of frontier towns. There were all kinds of scenarios that appeared, and the groups that got placed together ranged between five and over a hundred, but they had one thing in common. They all got a quest to either defend from monsters or to explore somewhere filled with monsters.

That first mission was one of the bloodiest, with almost a tenth dying. People weren’t able to adapt to the new change. Some took too-large risks, feeling invulnerable with their new skills. Others simply froze like deer in headlights, getting mowed down by unforgiving monsters.

The missions were actually quite easy, though, and the monsters very weak. It was only due to ineptitude people died this early. After the mission, people were graded by their performance and rewarded accordingly.

Everyone received a “Tutorial” title after the first mission, which started with no benefits. However, after the first mission, its rewards increased. Some got a few stat points, while others with bad quest performances got nothing, their titles still giving out zero attributes.

What followed was a schedule of three days of quests, followed by one day of rest and meditation. After the first three missions, a new option was added, where people could choose their difficulty, ranging from Easy to Impossible. There



was even a mortality rate for the quest, with Easy having 5% and Impossible having a 99% chance to perish.

The higher quests obviously gave much higher returns, but most people still chose Easy. However, a few people chose the more difficult ones, such as “Normal.” Their death rate was higher compared to the advertised stats, but that was likely from being unskilled beginners. Zac himself remembered his early battles, and he was still surprised he was alive today.

Over the weeks, the distance between those who strove for power and those who only wanted to survive only became larger and larger. The elites’ Tutorial-title continuously filled up with more and more bonus attributes, and their levels were far higher as well. They also got other rewards, such as better gear, and in some cases, even skills, Nexus Crystals, and cultivation manuals.

Meanwhile, the weaklings, such as the cultivators like Ryan and the formerly captured girls, barely survived through the Easy quests, mainly relying on others to keep them safe.

They got almost nothing from the Tutorial in the end, only the initial five-to-all-stats bonus, plus on average ten additional attributes. Zac grimaced when hearing them squander such a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Even the monsters that they fought gave huge bonuses to Cosmic Energy and Nexus Coins compared to normal beasts on New Earth.

Of course, that was only discovered when the cultivators returned and found further progression extremely tedious and dangerous. That was why many plateaued in level and power soon after returning.

Ryan was an example of this. He had been somewhere in the average middle of the cultivators during the Tutorial. He only chose easy quests, but he was one of those who actually fought during the missions instead of hiding. He left the Tutorial as level 14 and having 15 bonus attributes on his Tutorial-title.

He tried to keep his progress going by heading out into the forests fighting beasts but was dismayed by the amount of

Cosmic Energy he gained by the low-level critters. He gave up after a week when he had only gained a level. It wasn't due to laziness, but rather a brush with death when a level 30 or so monster found him, and he barely survived the escape.

His last three levels he'd gained from his F-graded cultivation manual, and he was close to becoming level 19. He, unfortunately, wasn't able to get a real cultivation manual, and the basic one from the Tutorial was tortuously slow in progress after the initial ten levels.

Zac knew that the System rewarded the brave, and he knew that some likely had survived through Hard and even Impossible missions. He wondered what kinds of bonuses and rewards they'd gotten. Ryan and the others weren't sure, as there was no real powerhouse in their group. Thom Sullivan was the strongest, but he reportedly mainly did a mix of Easy and a few Normal missions.

It had reminded Zac that just because he had his titles and his level advantage, he wasn't invulnerable. Salvation and Thea Marshall were perhaps just as strong as him since their rewards from the Tutorial might have been extremely extravagant.



## NEIGHBORS

“I seem to remember that you possess a gravity array, is that right?” Alyn suddenly said, bringing Zac out of his musings.

“Yes, it’s currently placed in my camp. I can bring it over if you want it.” Zac nodded.

“I would like if you upgraded it as well. I want it to cover the entire academy area,” she said with a smile.

Zac frowned and opened up his Town Shop and found out that the upgraded small-scale gravity array cost half a million Nexus Coins. It wasn’t a huge fortune, but also not negligible, since it was 5% of his current wealth. He expected that quickly bringing the army up to a decent power would cost millions on top of that, and he couldn’t wantonly spend his money.

“It’s a bit expensive. Are you sure it’s needed at this stage?” he tentatively asked.

Alyn simply smiled at him, and something about that smile gave Zac a hair-raising feeling. For some reason, he felt a pressure similar to when he fought the Fiend Wolf, though this time, the easiest solution was to just open his wallet. If he really lacked funds later, he could always sell some of his Nexus Crystals.

“Follow Alyn’s commands. You can consider the first week with me a warm-up; the real training begins now. It might be grueling, but the path to power is paved with blood,” he said after turning to the newest citizens of Port Atwood.

Alyn nodded approvingly at Zac’s comment while Alea simply rolled her eyes.

“By the way, Alea said you had some idea regarding the hive?”

“Yes. When the warriors traveled through the hive, we found that a new queen has been born,” she said.

Zac immediately frowned and looked toward the huge structure in the distance.

“Don’t worry, the queen is still an infant and is still busy incorporating the old body into itself. It will take years, perhaps decades without nurturing, before it can start creating new warriors,” she added.

Zac sighed in relief at the news. He was in no mood to fight another ant wave on top of the third wave.

“So what was your idea?”

“You need Beast Tamers, people with a class that’s based on controlling beasts,” she explained.

“It would be extremely beneficial. The biggest boon would be that we might be able to tame the Ayn hive queen. That would essentially give control over the whole hive. It would also be good for you, with all these barghest around. They’re currently slowly turning feral, as we have no beast tamers with us who can keep them in line.

“They aren’t very dangerous, but they can still become a good weapon. The barghest with us are just youth, and with the help of a good trainer, they can get stronger, the alphas even reaching E-grade with time,” she kept going, some excitement glistening in her eyes.

“Do you have means of guaranteeing them getting any form of Beast Tamer class if I can get some more people to train?” Zac curiously asked.

It sounded like a pretty good idea. There was an extreme number of barghest in the forest, and from what he’d learned, they would start multiplying in a few years when they became real adults. If he could use the dumb beasts as meat shields in battle with incursions or others, it would protect the lives of his people.

“Well, no. Clan Azh’Rezak didn’t possess any Heritage of that type and hired experts from an association to take care of their beast hordes. But I have a few ideas that might work. I think if you can recruit a few of those beastmen I heard about, it would be for the best. They might have a better affinity for those kinds of classes,” she said.

“I will see if I can get some more recruits,” he said with a nod before leaving the burgeoning academy.

Of course, with Alyn at the helm, it might turn more into something like an agoge, the Spartan training regimen. It seemed that Alea chose to stay behind as well, and Zac didn’t mind. After he pawned off his new squadron to Alyn, he went to find Adran.

Since Ogras was still in seclusion, the portly administrator would be the one with the highest authority. There were also the generals, but none of them really cared about management and preferred to focus on their own training.

“I heard about the mixed results of the expeditions,” Zac started as he sat down in a chair in Adran’s office.

“Yes. Mostly, it went fine, with the exception of the last group. Nasty things, that species. Not something we’ve met or heard about before. However, insectoid species are usually the same. There generally is a queen in command, holding absolute power,” he answered.

“They’re called the Zhix. They’re insanely aggressive, from what I’ve heard during my excursions. Anything that comes close gets relentlessly attacked, no matter if it’s a native or an incursion,” Zac added.

Adran frowned at that information. “I’m sorry to add to your troubles. But I’ve talked with our remaining earth mages a bit. They say that it’s technically possible for there to be tunnels between our island and theirs. The Nexus Vein beneath this island has hardened the subterranean walls, and they should be able to hold even under the sea. So if those things keep digging, following the thickness of Cosmic Energy, they’ll end up in our mountains sooner or later.”

Zac groaned at the news. The prospect of hyperaggressive ant-men flooding out from his crystal mine was something that sounded like a real pain in the ass, both to his wallet and his town. Besides, who knew, they might dig for the vein and ruin it as well, which would make Port Atwood a far less valuable piece of property.

“How strong were the warriors?” Zac suddenly asked after mulling things over.

“Not too strong. Their attributes were equivalent of someone somewhere around level 20 to 25. They were assisted by quite hard bodies, though, which should count as at least an additional 30 or so Endurance. And there were a lot of them. Our scouts killed quite a few while they fled toward the vessel, but they simply kept coming,” Adran answered.

“Very well. I will travel there myself,” Zac said with a grimace. “Perhaps I can get some of them to talk if I display my power. And if they don’t want to talk, I’ll just chop down their numbers a bit. I am in need of some battle in any case.”

Adran looked surprised but, after considering it for some time, nodded. “A tip, if you can get them as an ally, you should. Insectoid populations are usually quite strong in the Multiverse. They have high reproduction rates and high-average powers. The queens of the higher species are extremely feared, being able to channel their whole hive’s power into devastating attacks,” the administrator added.

“What about the other islands? Anything of interest?” Zac continued.

“It is clear that the Nexus Vein beneath our island has affected the whole region to a certain extent. Most of the islands have higher concentrations of Cosmic Energy than usual. Together with the temperate climate, it means many can be made into farming islands that can provide Port Atwood with a continuous supply of food and cultivation materials.

“There is also a mountainous island not too far that looks promising for setting up a mining operation for metals. We still haven’t found anything of the sort in our own mountain, and need supply to keep our industry going,” Adran answered.

“All in all, eighteen of the closest islands were scouted. Surprisingly, we saw signs of habitation on ten of them. Seven were humans, two were the beastmen, and the last the so-called Zhix. We suspect the total population to reach roughly twenty thousand, excluding the insectoids, of course. There may be people on the other islands as well, and we simply didn't find them.”

“TWENTY thousand?” Zac exclaimed, shocked.

It was nowhere near the population of places like New Washington, but most larger towns had been fragmented into smaller bits, and a population of twenty thousand would be respectable at this stage of the world. Of course, it was just a fraction of the millions required in a population that most of the proper buildings in the Town Shop required, but it was a start.

“Yes, but most of them are concentrated to three larger settlements, two human and one beastkin. The largest town alone has an estimated population of over ten thousand,” Adran answered.

“How is their quality of life?” Zac asked.

“Mostly pretty wretched. The largest human settlement I mentioned earlier has organized themselves at least and erected a decent wall around a coastal village. The rest are barely hanging on, and we even got a few requests from them to come with the scouts, even though they were demons. We did hide our appearances under hooded capes, though.”

It seemed that it wouldn't be impossible to gather a real population to get his town up and running. He wasn't sure whether it was better to start gathering people immediately or wait until after the third wave. He still had no idea what to expect from the third wave, but he couldn't imagine it would be easier than the last two. At the same time, he felt that with his power and equipment, there really shouldn't be a lot of suspense unless the System went crazy.

He still had a couple of days before the auction started, and about a week before the last horde arrived. Time was limited, but it might be a good idea to start building Port Atwood in



earnest. He'd start with the Zhix, as that was the most pressing matter. The hive had been right under his nose for months; who knew how far they had dug by now.

It didn't take long until Zac was sailing alone on one of the Creator vessels. He'd gotten the route from the fishermen, and it was only an hour away. He hadn't even checked in on Emily or his camp, eager to set sail. The vessels were as quick as speedboats but far more stable, so he pushed through the waves like an arrow.

What he'd said to Adran was true. He still felt stifled with his emotions in turmoil ever since Greenworth, and he almost hoped that these Zhix kept up their hostility. He had forced himself to keep it together for his new recruits, but he really needed the solitude of this excursion.

He wasn't very worried either, as from all accounts, he wasn't in any real danger. If a fisherman and a few of the normal demons could fight them off and leave, though with some losses, then he wouldn't have any real trouble. These Zhix were just like humans, newly integrated into the System, and there should be almost no warriors of their kind that could match his power, especially not the ones stuck on an isolated island.

Just as the fishermen described, he arrived at the island in roughly an hour. It was far smaller compared to his own, and he judged it might just be a tenth the size all together. The climate of the island was essentially the same as his own, but there was less vegetation, as most of the island was covered by a large mountain. It almost looked like a large volcano with some jungle on the edges of the island, but he wasn't able to tell whether it actually was a volcano or if it just looked like one.

He disembarked at the closest beach and threw his Creator vessel into a Cosmos Sack and headed inland. From what he understood, the Zhix were mainly subterranean, so they should be somewhere in the mountains. As he walked further inland toward the mountain, he was having a somewhat unsettling déjà vu from the first time he'd entered the mountain valley all

that time ago. The island was deathly silent; not a single chirp could be heard.

Until suddenly, a twig snapped, and all hell broke loose.



## THE ZHIX

Tens of warriors poured out from nowhere and mindlessly charged at him, making some loud clacking noises, and Zac immediately took out a weapon. However, since his goal was to see if an alliance was possible, he didn't bring out [**Verun's Bite**]. Instead, he took out a black wooden club made from the extremely dense trees he'd found on the island long ago.

After a roughly a minute of thwacking, twenty-seven ant-men lay down on the ground unconscious, and Zac was finally able to take a good look at them. He realized it was a misnomer to call these things ant-men, as they were even more humanlike than Ishiate.

Their faces were mostly human, apart from their noses, which were just two holes beneath a slight protuberance. The same could be said about their ears, almost looking like the cauliflower ears of professional wrestlers. Their eyes were those of a human, though a bit larger, and their irises were purple.

All in all, their faces could have passed as ugly humans if it weren't for the two antennae on their heads and the fact that their skin was tinged a bit purple. Their skin was quite hard as well, but not to the point of having a chitinous exoskeleton like the Ayn ants back on his own island.

They also had four normal appendages and even had clothes more intricate than what the Ishiate wore. When people spoke about the Zhix earlier, he had almost imagined them to look a bit like the mantis ants, having swords for arms.

But they held actual weapons in their pretty-human-looking hands.

Zac picked up one of the Zhix at random and walked some distance away from the others before pouring water from a canteen over it. It quickly woke up, sputtering and clacking, desperately waving its arms.

“I know you understand me. I need to speak to your leader. Don’t make me knock you unconscious again,” he said as he held the warrior down with his foot.

The Zhix warrior gave no response apart from struggling and screeching, causing Zac to grunt with annoyance before he knocked him out again. At least the intel was good, and these people were not very strong.

Actually, as Zac walked through the forest, he was starting to guess why. There was not a single living thing on the island. Perhaps they had already hunted everything to extinction. An island like this would not have too much wildlife from the start, and they might have found themselves without anything to kill to gain levels.

Zac kept meeting groups of warriors, but he kept knocking them out. He was surprised by the sheer number of them, wondering exactly how they could survive on this island. Could ant-men eat leaves and bark? Were they excellent fishermen? He had seen no boats, though, and it felt a bit unlikely for a species that lived underground to be used to the sea.

After walking for almost an hour, Zac reached the central mountain, and by this point, he’d clobbered well over a hundred of the warriors. Finally, he saw something that seemed man-made, a pretty even mountain path that led along the wall.

The path was only a meter wide, and after walking for ten minutes, the drop was high enough that Zac wasn’t sure he’d survive the fall. Luckily, he didn’t need to walk much longer until he reached a great plateau. It was even larger than a big town square and roughly a third of the way up the mountainside.

More impressively, it was clear to Zac that the whole plateau was actually carved into the mountain itself rather than a natural formation. Enormous statues lined both sides of the squarish plaza, with the inner side looking almost like the entrance to some ancient tomb.

He didn't have time to admire the beautiful craftsmanship, though, as there was a whole army standing at the ready between him and the entrance. A quick estimate put them at roughly a thousand warriors, most of them hefting daggers or short swords.

Zac remembered it was the same with those he'd encountered so far on the island, and he guessed that their choice of weapons was a result of mainly fighting underground, where ranged weapons and large unwieldy things like spears weren't as effective.

The army stood without moving, balefully glaring at Zac, who walked up from the small path and entered the plaza proper. He looked back at them for some time and decided to make one last attempt at communicating. He empowered his voice with Cosmic Energy to make sure that everyone in the plaza, and any hidden leader, could hear his message.

“This is the last time I try for diplomacy with the Zhix. I am Zachary Atwood from a neighboring island. I am a human, one of the two other races that were affected just like you when the so-called System decided to merge our planets together into the current mess.

“I mean no harm to your population. All the warriors I have encountered so far are still alive. But I need to speak to your leader or leaders. As a token of trust, I can give you a piece of information you might not know. You are not alone; your kind are spread all over this new planet,” Zac said.

*Being goddamn lunatics who attack everyone, he silently added in his mind.*

There had been no reaction during the beginning of his speech, not even with his last sentence. Zac suddenly realized why and wanted to smack himself. Unless they were idiots,

they should understand that their kind were still alive just from checking their own Ladder.

Still, there was some movement in the army. Generally, it was just small glances between the troops, but it was enough for Zac to know that they understood his words. After being relentlessly attacked so many times, he had actually started doubting the effect of his language skill.

“Why should we trust someone who reeks of impurity and chaos?” A sharp voice came from the distance as a group of Zhix walked out from the huge gate in the mountain.

In the front, a Zhix that was almost twice as large compared to the others walked, and it was accompanied by two elders and eight guards dressed in far more intricate gear than the army in front of it. The Zhix army quickly made way to create a path for the new group.

Zac honestly couldn't tell whether the supersized Zhix was a male or female, as it looked completely androgynous. He was expecting a female since the information he possessed from Adran said that most insectoid species were ruled by a queen.

Then again, the same could be said for the warriors as well. He had no real way of telling their genders; they all pretty much looked the same.

The party stopped a decent distance away from Zac, the two advisors clearly looking unhappy.

“Your Holiness, you mustn't talk to the fallen. It's against the precepts. The impurity must be cleansed lest it keep spreading. We're already sullied, but we might still be redeemed. But if we start consorting with agents of chaos, we will truly be lost,” one of them hurriedly said.

“What the hell are you talking about? Fallen? Sullied? Do you even know what's going on, being stuck here on an isolated island?”

“Do you think your tricks will work on us, fallen one? Your kind may have taken a new face, but you can't hide the impurity coursing through your body. We eradicated your kind

in the olden days, and we will do it again,” the other advisor huffed, and it looked like most of the warriors agreed with the sentiment.

“You mean the Cosmic Energy? It’s not like I asked to have it. But our worlds got merged together; it’s not like we had any say in whether the System crammed our world full of the energy. And you call me fallen, but aren’t you the same? I sense that you are at a decent level,” Zac said with a frown.

“More lies, just like the Dominators always spewed,” the other elder scoffed.

“You said you’re from another world than ours? Explain,” the large Zhix interjected, ignoring the entreating looks from the others.

Zac thought for a second before he started narrating an abridged version of what he’d learned in the past months. First, he explained the System, with the classes, attributes, and ranks. Next, he told them about the history of the Multiverse and about the Apostates. Finally, he explained their current situation, mostly composed of information from New Washington, and some information about the incursions.

Honestly, he would have rather just captured the large Zhix and forced a Contract of Binding on it, but it wouldn’t work for multiple reasons. First of all, a contract couldn’t be enacted under coercion. The contracting system was created by the Apostate of Order, and something like using it under threat of violence was the opposite of what he envisioned.

Besides, it appeared there were special restrictions in place on New Earth. It appeared it wasn’t possible to enter contracts with the other races at the moment. Zac had been curious about how the girls had known about the contract back at Greenworth and had been told that it was common knowledge in the new world.

People had also found out that entering a contract with the Ishiate simply wasn’t possible; the System blocked it. The general theory was that the System still considered the three races on Earth in contention and blocked certain systems’



cross-races. Perhaps a leader of the planet had to emerge before all systems were completely unlocked.

“I don’t know anything about your kind, but from your words, it sounds like there were some people on your old world who could use Cosmic Energy and who used it for evil. That has nothing to do with us humans or the Ishiate. We come from our own separate worlds and are too busy struggling with our own problems to have time to plot against your people,” he finished.

“I sense no falsehood from this being, and what it says has some merit. We have called the strange events of late a Dominator plot so long that we have almost convinced ourselves of it. But our hive is dying, and we need to open our eyes, even if what we see is not what we hoped for,” the large one slowly said.

“No! Impurity must be cleansed!” one of the well-equipped guards suddenly roared as it ran toward Zac, who immediately readied himself with furrowed brows.

However, the huge Zhix moved with amazing speed and suddenly held the royal guard by its neck.

“Order is not lost just because some things change. You dare defy the hive?” the leader said as it held the warrior by its throat.

“It... is... heresy,” the guard squeezed out, looking unwilling to back down.

The leader only snorted, and with a sickening crunch, crushed the neck of the warrior and threw its body away like a piece of garbage. Zac was amazed at the power of the thing, as the corpse was thrown over twenty meters away without, it seemed, the leader using much force.

He had a feeling that the high power was something it was born with rather than something it had gained from the System.

He already knew that many species were far superior to humans, or even demons, when it came to innate power. Some

species were born at E-grade race or even higher, and many had naturally higher stats.

Others were extremely adept at grasping Dao Seeds, making it seem as though the universe itself handed them out as gifts. The Multiverse simply wasn't equal, and some were just better than others.

“You call yourself a human, is it? You have told a fantastical tale. But how will we know you are not lying?” the leader said as it turned back to Zac. “You told us that the reason we lost a part of the hive was the so-called Tutorial, but why was no one returned after a month?”

“If no one was returned, they either all died or were dropped off somewhere else. I'm still searching for friends and family as well, as they might have been thrown anywhere in the world. As for proof... well, what kind of proof do you want?” Zac asked, to which the large Zhix only turned toward the huge gate.

After a few minutes, another Zhix came running through the gate, and it was dressed quite differently from the others.



## THE DOMINATORS

The new Zhix seemed to have once been dressed somewhat in the same manner as the advisors to the side of the so-called Holiness. However, the robe was singed and damaged all over, making it look like the Zhix had walked through a fire or an explosion. It also had a huge backpack on its back, which jumped up and down with every hurried step it took.

“Your Holiness,” the new Zhix panted with a bow as it reached the leader.

The large Zhix leader only nodded and turned back to Zac.

“You have come to our hive, told a fantastical tale. But you still are leaving us wondering. What brought you to our doorstep?” it said, cutting straight to the chase.

“No offense, but your kind is known to be insanely aggressive and a danger to anyone who is placed close to your hives,” Zac said.

It was with some mixed emotions he saw that the Zhix in no way took it as an insult, but rather a point of pride.

“I am the leader of my town, and I have citizens to take care of. I need to find out whether you are a threat or if you could become allies,” he said, hiding nothing.

“And if you deem us a threat?” it lightly continued.

“It is not my style to leave trouble in my own backyard,” Zac said, unflinchingly staring at the Zhix leader.

Suddenly, the ground cracked under the feet of the large Zhix as it exploded into motion. It blasted toward Zac, almost

matching the speed of himself when using **[Loamwalker]**. Zac was shocked, but battle was hardwired into his body by this point, and he summoned his axe and swung out. It clashed against an elaborate dagger that was aimed straight toward his throat, and the power in the strike shocked Zac.

From his estimation, the Zhix leader had almost as much strength as he did, and they were both pushed away from the strike, the collision creating a shockwave that ruined a large area of the plateau. Even one of the huge statues was impacted and showed some spider-vein cracks, much to the dismay of the advisors.

Zac growled and got ready to fight as he summoned **[Chop]** and created a huge edge. However, the leader jumped back as swiftly as it had attacked, once again standing by the advisors. Zac relaxed a bit, but didn't unsummon his weapon.

“You talk about genocide, but you have power to back up your words. If we die, it will be weakness that gets removed from the swarm, and it will be just,” it said.

Zac was confused but could only assume that it did not mean to actually fight him to death. Still, he wouldn't let things rest like that, and he launched the edge as a projectile straight at the leader. The guards immediately moved to intercept, but the leader pushed past them, grasping two daggers this time.

It intercepted the edge by using both its arms but was pushed backward from the force, slamming a few of the guardian Zhix out of the way like bowling pins. It was only after twenty meters it stopped. However, it did manage to successfully block the strike without getting hurt, surprising Zac even further.

“Attacks on humanity will be avenged. Sometimes it will be immediate; sometimes it will take years. But it is coming,” Zac said as he stared at the bleeding insectoids that were crawling back to their feet after being crashed into by their leader.

“A good creed to have,” the Zhix simply said, seemingly not taking any offense.

“You reek of corruption. But then again, so do I by this point. We will not attack your people unless they provoke the Zhix or our precepts. The Zhix are not used to cooperation with outsiders of the hive, but we must adapt to the situation,” it continued.

“To that end... Ibtep,” it said as it turned to the Zhix with the backpack.

“I’d like for you to bring my advisor with you to your hive and return them at a later point. Ibtep can answer questions about our customs and learn of yours. Ibtep will be responsible for the cooperation between our hives, as I rarely leave my shrine,” the leader said as the odd Zhix stepped forward.

“That is fine. I’m sure we can come to an understanding. What the Zhix do is their own business. We only ask that you do not dig underground toward our island that’s in that direction,” Zac said as he pointed southwest. “If you do, we will consider it as a direct attack. And we will retaliate with everything we have.”

The leader looked at Zac for a bit, the silence stretching to the point that Zac believed another surprise attack was incoming. However, it simply nodded after a while as it started moving toward the gate.

“Very well, we accept this premise. Ibtep will take it from here,” it said as it started moving away, accompanied by its advisors and guards.

“Hello, strange being. We are hungry,” Ibtep said with a bow.

Zac stared blankly at the advisor for a few seconds, unsure whether [**Book of Babel**] was on the fritz.

“Um... Come again?” Zac hesitantly said.

“We are hungry. Your kind eat for sustenance too, no doubt?” it said, pointing to its mouth.

“Uh... yeah. Do you mean you need food?”

“Yes, we are very hungry,” it solemnly said with a nod.

“Well, what do you eat?”

“Anything that once lived except Zhix,” he quickly answered.

Zac ardently hoped that the list would be amended to also exclude humans, but for now, he simply threw out a bunch of huge beast carcasses from his pouch. During the week of travel with his new squad of soldiers, he'd stuffed multiple bags full of meat just in case he ever needed it. The plateau suddenly filled with everything from boars to huge snakes to great birds.

“Do all of your kind possess the power to create food out of nothing?” Ibtep eagerly asked, and even the leader, who was starting to move back to the entrance into the mountain, stopped and looked back at Zac.

“No, these are beasts my soldiers killed before. I simply stored them in a magical bag that has increased room and preserves the food,” he explained as he showed a Cosmos Sack to him.

“Very convenient,” Ibtep said with a nod. “I want a pouch.”

Zac had some trouble getting used to the directness of this Zhix, but he couldn't just keep giving things away.

“They are a bit rare. You can buy one from me for a million Nexus Coins,” he said.

Ibtep froze for a few seconds before he rushed back toward the army, who still stood in place. After some subdued chattering, warriors came up to him one after another until Ibtep returned. A prompt appeared, and Zac received a million Nexus Coins from the insectoid, and he quickly handed over one of his spare pouches.

“How do I use it?” it curiously asked.

“Drip a drop of blood on it. That will bind it to you. After that, you only infuse some Cosmic Energy in it,” Zac explained.

It quickly followed Zac's instructions, and in short order, it was putting its backpack into the pouch and retrieving it again, over and over.

“I am done. Let us go,” it said after playing around for a bit, and Zac nodded.

“What about all the meat?” Zac asked just in case.

“It will be taken care of. Your donation was very generous,” it simply said as it started walking away.

Zac and Ibtep walked back along the same path he’d used to enter the island, following the mountain road down to the jungle. Zac was quite curious about the Zhix and thought a compliment would get the insectoid talking.

“Your leader is quite powerful.”

“Administering last rites makes the Holiness very strong since what you called the integration happened,” the Zhix answered.

“Administering rites? What does that mean?” Zac asked, confused.

The Zhix called the large one “Your Holiness,” so he guessed their society was some sort of theocracy led by priests.

“The Holiness cuts out weakness from the hive by administering last rites. To die by the Holiness instead of from starvation or age is a great reward,” Ibtep explained.

“Wait, the Holiness kills its own people?” Zac asked, surprised.

“Our hive faced starvation. Many of our gardens and farms collapsed or disappeared suddenly, leaving us with too little food. We dug to find sustenance, but the stone was unusually hard, making progress slow. We even ate everything above ground, but it didn’t last us long.

“Dying from lack of food is a great injustice, and the Holiness administered last rites, giving the citizens a warrior’s death,” Ibtep explained. “Many tried to stop the rites since every ceremony forced an infusion of more chaos into the Holiness. But the Holiness kept going, ignoring the damage they caused themselves.”

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“Your Holiness, is this truly wise? That thing might be tricking us. Besides, it contains a terrifying amount of corruption, or Cosmic Energy as the being calls it. Zachary Atwood can be a great threat to the hive,” Mammaki hesitantly said as they stood in front of the throne.

“We all knew that it was unlikely that the Dominators were the cause of our current situation. If they were powerful enough to rearrange the whole world, we would have been enslaved again long ago. It was just a convenient enemy to keep unity during troubling times. The zealots might buy it, but you are no fools. Besides, I believe it has no real reason to lie to us,” Nonet said as they showed their congregants their hands.

Their hands had multiple broken fingers and were shaking, and the advisors were extremely shocked by the sight.

“That is—”

“Sacrilege!” Multiple shouts erupted at once, but order was quickly restored by a wave of Nonet.

“It is just weakness leaving the body. I will be reborn stronger. But that so-called human had no reason to lie, since I sensed it was not blustering when it said it would eradicate the hive. The powerful have no reason to lie to the weak. The one called Zachary Atwood could just destroy or enslave us if it so desired,” Nonet continued. “Just the fact that it didn’t proves it’s not a Dominator.”

“Immediately stop all digging toward the human’s island. Refocus efforts on creating new farmland,” Nonet decreed after some deliberation.

“Are you sure? We are almost halfway there,” an advisor asked.

“For now. We built the tunnels to have a chance at a final assault at what might have been a Dominator stronghold, but it looks like that is not the case. But reinforce the tunnels; we might need them in the future,” Nonet said.

“I think we will need to work with these foreign life-forms. The Dominators were a huge threat before the world changed.

One of their warlocks took hundreds, often thousands of sacrifices to kill. Imagine their power now when the very air is full of corruption, and every death is an infusion of chaos,” the large Zhix said with a somber expression. “I wish that it was all just speculation, but you have seen the signs as well. The Dominators are back.”

A troubling silence was the only answer as the advisors fearfully looked at each other.



## I B T E P

On the way back, Zac wasn't accosted by any Zhix warriors, leading him to believe the Zhix had some sort of nonverbal form of communication. He'd already suspected it when he saw the so-called Holiness summon Ibtep by just turning toward the entrance to the hive.

It turned out they possessed some sort of sonar sense and could create small vibrations that were too subdued for human ears but could be picked up by the Zhix through a unique organ. It was also this organ that helped them sense Cosmic Energy, or corruption as they called it, since the energy caused interference to their sonar sense.

It was a bit jarring to speak with the Zhix, who seemed to only follow its own conversation flow. For example, a question regarding leadership in human society was immediately followed by "Do humans poop?"

"What about genders? How do I tell who's male and female?" Zac asked.

"Gender? Explain?" Ibtep asked, looking confused.

Zac did a simple explanation of the mammal reproductive system, and Ibtep seemed to understand.

"The Zhix are neither. Or both. We both carry the seed of life and possess the ability to germinate it, but we need the blessing of the Anointed to create life. Without their blessing, no child can be conceived," Ibtep explained.

"So you give birth?" Zac followed up.

“No, we create eggs,” Ibtep answered.

Zac glanced over at the Zhix, having a hard time imagining Ibtep squatting over a large egg like a bird.

It was clear that their society was more humanoid than ant-like, though the Holiness was some sort of equivalent to a hive queen. However, there were no “worker Zhix” or “warrior Zhix,” as everyone except the Holiness, or the Anointed, as they were collectively called, were the same.

Unfortunately, any further questions about the Anointed were unhesitantly rebuffed. The only real information was that the hive on the island was quite small, only having one Anointed. The large hives could have quite a few of them, one of which would be the alpha.

That information was quite troubling since the leader of a small remote Zhix hive was far stronger than any human he’d encountered so far. He wondered just how strong one of these so-called alphas would be, as they might even eclipse his own power. That might only go for attributes, though; Zac still had the advantage of multiple Dao Seeds and a Rare class.

“Do you have a Nexus Node?” Zac asked next.

“What is that?” the Zhix answered, to which Zac simply explained the appearance of the crystal.

“Yes, it appeared next to the Holiness soon after the integration. However, it was sealed away, as it reeked of corruption. I wanted to study it, but it wasn’t allowed,” the Zhix answered. “Tell me, what does it do?”

“Well, it has a few functions. It can sell skills, and—” Zac started, but was interrupted.

“Like that large blade of corruption you created?” Ibtep interrupted.

“Yeah, although I got that one from my class. You get a class from the Node as well,” he explained.

“Can anyone get a class?” the insectoid continued.

“Yes, at level 25,” Zac nodded.

“I want to use your Node later.”

“Sure,” Zac answered with some surprise. “How did you reach level 25 already?”

There were quite a few of the Zhix, and Zac had a hard time imagining them gaining twenty-five levels from some island critters.

“Stones of Corruption,” Ibtep answered as they took out their backpack and produced a raw Nexus Crystal. “These Stones of Corruption appeared beneath our hive after the integration, and they were thrown away due to the chaos they contained. I took a few for experimentation. There are also many things to kill underground, though few proved edible.”

Zac frowned when he saw the crystal, but after asking a few follow-up questions, it seemed that they didn't come from his mine. They were scattered about beneath the surface, but with far less concentration compared to his mine. That was in line with what he knew about the crystals. This island wasn't too far away from his Nexus Vein, so it wasn't too surprising that some crystals would appear here as well.

However, he made a mental reminder to consult the earth mages to construct some sort of warning system, making sure that these Zhix weren't getting too close for comfort. They kept discussing various subjects until they reached the ocean.

“What now, human?” Ibtep asked as they turned toward Zac, who took out his Creator vessel from a pouch.

“Get on,” Zac said as he jumped up on the boat, but was surprised to see the Zhix not moving.

“What is this contraption, human? It is throbbing with corruption,” Ibtep said skeptically.

“It's a magical boat of sorts. We use Nexus Crystals, the ones you call Stones of Corruption, to power this vessel to travel the seas,” he explained.

“Have humans always used corruption for such purposes?” they asked.

“No, before the integration, I don’t think our world had any corruption. At least it wasn’t known to the public,” he answered.

“Then how can you possess such a thing now?” Ibtep asked while looking up at Zac.

“The System gives out various things, and we have a shop on our island where you can buy things from all over the Multiverse. It is very convenient,” Zac explained, skirting the subject of the Creators.

The Zhix only nodded and got up on the boat after a bit. Soon they were cutting through the waves, almost flying like an arrow toward Port Atwood. Zac was surprised to hear that there were no oceans on the old Zhix home world, only subterranean basins. Perhaps that explained why there was so much land on the new world, essentially forming a supercontinent.

There were a few large sea creatures that seemed interested in the boat, but the Creators’ reputation wasn’t unwarranted, as the boat quickly sped away. However, Zac slowed down his vessel every now and then to catch one of the huge fish swimming about, wanting to create some variation in Port Atwood’s diet.

The Zhix didn’t mind the interruption, rather the opposite. Since the hive was on the brink of starvation due to the randomization ruining their infrastructure, they were very interested in alternative food sources and kept asking questions about the wildlife of the ocean.

Finally, they reached Port Atwood and disembarked some distance away from the shipyard. The advisor was very curious as it saw the structures of the Creators from the distance, but Zac gave the same excuse as he used to. The shipyard was a private area, and entering would result in death.

Since the Zhix was very eager to get a class, they headed straight toward his camp. Zac looked forward to the day the third wave was done with so he could become a Lord. By then, he could buy subsidiary Nexus Nodes and place them around

the town, making it so that no one had any reason to barge into his private home.

However, as they closed in on his campsite, Zac stopped in amazement, as the area had been completely re-formed. Large gardens had replaced the woods, creating beautiful scenery for the newly erected mansion. Some were created with various flowers and bushes, others with stones and gravel like a Zen garden.

Rather than a huge building, as with Ogras' palace in Azh'Rodum, his new home was more of a compound with many smaller buildings. Still, the main building was about the size of the mansions he'd visited in Greenworth.

The style was much the same as the one the demons used, with Eastern architecture getting fused with nature. There were courtyards and pagodas apart from the gardens, and trees were a constant part of the structures.

To his surprise, he saw that they'd even used his camper, pushing it up a few meters into the air by lodging it in a tree, and growing a large patio outside made of intertwined branches. Honestly, he felt that the camper was the most interesting place, but he soon realized that it was occupied, as Emily peered out from the patio.

"Why didn't you come home immediately? I was pla—" she yelled but got her tongue stuck when she saw Zac's companion.

"What the hell is that?!" she shouted, quickly retreating from the edge.

"Emily, come down here," Zac said with some embarrassment.

Only after some time did the teenager climb down the tree on what looked like stairs naturally growing out of the tree trunk.

"Is this a young of your species?" Ibtep asked as they turned to Zac.

"An adolescent. Emily is soon sixteen," Zac answered.



“Hello, young human. Here, have a snack,” Ibtep said as they took out a dead grub from their backpack.

Both Zac and Emily blankly stared at the large larvae for some time, until Zac’s mouth started tugging upward.

“Don’t be rude. Have a snack,” Zac said, smiling, and received a scathing glare in return.

“I am not sure if we can eat that. Humans have a more delicate palate,” Zac coughed before things got awkward.

“How inconvenient. These are very tasty,” Ibtep said as they chomped down on the fat larvae. “I had to hide this from the others, saving it for a special occasion.”

“This is Ibtep, an ambassador for the Zhix hive on the neighboring island,” Zac explained to Emily, who was still warily examining the Zhix.

“Your constitutions look a bit different. Is this due to the genders you mentioned earlier?” Ibtep asked.

“Yes, Emily is a female, while I am a male,” Zac explained.

“So this Emily will take your seed and bear children in the future?” the Zhix continued, causing Zac to cough uncomfortably.

“Cough... Well, no. Not in this case. You generally only do that with your mate,” he helplessly explained before he turned to the teenager, eager to change the subject. He could only thank the stars that neither Emily nor the ambassador had the language skill yet. “Where is the Nexus Node?”

Emily, quite wary of the Zhix, kept a constant vigil while she quickly led them to the largest building in the area.

“We had to take down all the arrays while rebuilding. The poles are over there,” Emily said as she pointed toward a closet.

“The Node is in there?” Ibtep asked, following Emily’s finger.

“No, I keep a few arrays in there,” Zac answered.

“Arrays?” Ibtep asked, curious about the new word.

“I can show you later,” Zac said as he led the Zhix to the crystal.

“It will automatically start when you touch the crystal. If it works the same as for humans for you, it will give you five choices. Increased rarity of the class will generally mean it is stronger, but it will also be much harder to upgrade in the future. Some classes are meant for combat; some are meant for other things, such as crafting.” Zac briefly recapped how it worked.

The Zhix didn’t hesitate and just walked straight up to the crystal and placed its hand on it. It stood still like that for a few minutes until it let go and moved away.

“So what did you get?” Zac curiously asked, but was only answered by a toothy grin.



## SETTING THE COURSE

“I picked something called Seeker,” Ibtep relented after a while. “I am unclear about the details, but the description was interesting. *Knowledge, treasure, power. The search never ends.*”

Zac had no idea what kind of class it was either, but he guessed it was something of a mix between a scholar and a scout. He actually found it a bit fitting, since if there was one thing that personified his new tentative ally, it was an unrelenting curiosity. He was starting to get the feeling that the Holiness had picked Ibtep for this mission party to get some peace and quiet.

After they’d done what they needed, he brought the Zhix with him to the town, and the reactions were quite expressive. A group of warriors quickly gathered close by, balefully glaring at the Zhix. Zac sighed, as he knew this reaction was coming.

“Greetings, people of Hive Atwood. I am Ibtep, liaison of the Holiness,” they said, looking unperturbed by the bloodlust in the gazes.

No one answered, but only kept glaring at the Zhix. Of course, Zac knew that only a scant few in the audience could understand him.

“They’re mad about the friends they lost on your island recently, so making friends might be a bit hard,” Zac said.

“It was weakness leaving your hive. But if anyone feels it was unjust, I can arrange a death match against those who

felled your warriors. Hive Kundevi always welcomes a chance to hone their purity.”

Those with **[Book of Babel]** translated the Zhix’s words, and his words gave the demons a start. Many hesitantly glanced at each other, looking a bit unwilling to enter a death battle for the fallen demons. Zac wasn’t sure what to do about the situation either, and he felt it wasn’t right for him to start meddling. After all, no one had killed more demons than he had.

But he also knew that the demons wouldn’t be angry forever. Sudden death was a much more expected part of life for them, and most of them didn’t expect to die of old age. Dying in an effort to gain power or wealth was the norm, and the scouts had all volunteered for the missions.

“I’m sure you want to explore our, uh, hive on your own for a while. You will need to have an escort at all times, though, since our alliance still isn’t set in stone,” he said, and the Zhix looked excited rather than offended.

“Very well, human, it has been an interesting experience traveling with you. We’ll speak again soon,” they said as they walked away.

“You two, please escort them for now. Keep them away from any critical areas. And no death matches against this one. I am trying to form an alliance with their kind. But they are a bit crazy, and if any of you want to fight in the future, I’m sure they won’t mind,” Zac said as he looked at two of the demons in the group, who nodded and followed the Zhix.

Zac was quite relieved to leave the Zhix a bit to their own devices after a day of odd questions. So far, he felt that the Zhix might not be the worst group of people to form an alliance with. They were a bit insane, and Zac felt they might be crazed zealots, but he didn’t sense much duplicity from them.

If he could help them understand that Cosmic Energy wasn’t some corruption, but rather a natural part of their new world, they might not attack everyone and everything. If he could use this hive to make alliances with the Zhix all over the

world, they might be in a far better position against the incursions. They clearly loved battle, and if they could change their focus from the so-called Dominators to the foreign invaders, then Zac would have allies that were likely even more useful than humanity.

Still, it was a plan in its infancy, and he wouldn't risk his town just for such a goal. If they showed any signs of betrayal, he wouldn't hesitate to eradicate the hive. Luckily, they were completely isolated on their island, as seafaring was not their forte. With the waters being filled with dangerous things, they were essentially stuck where they were unless Zac helped them.

With all that in mind, he was once again heading for Adran's command tent and found the administrator neck-deep in various documents.

"Call the various leaders. I'd like to have a meeting in an hour," Zac said as he immediately left, only hearing an acknowledgment as he left the door.

Next he walked back to the academy and found the schoolmistress lounging in a chair while overlooking the training field. Zac took out an intricate box from his pouch and handed it over to Alyn as he walked up to her.

"The upgraded array," he simply said.

"Perfect, I will set it up as they are resting," she said happily.

"How are things going?" Zac asked.

"Splendid, no permanent disabilities as of yet," Alyn answered with some pride, drawing a pained grimace from Zac.

"They've had a tough life. I want them strong, but not to the point where half of them die or get crippled to get there," Zac said as he glanced down at the demoness.

"Of course; I have it under control."

Zac looked out over the field and saw the recruits standing in proper lines, following the movements of one of the demon

soldiers who held the same type of spear as the others.

“I will need roughly a million Nexus Coins to get these recruits started. After that, I expect them to be self-sufficient by hunting barghest or mining,” Alyn said.

Zac simply transferred the funds over to her, actually being a bit surprised by the low quote.

“From the way you equipped them, I understand that you intend to follow my advice, giving them all uniform classes?” she asked as she looked up at Zac, who nodded affirmatively.

“It would be good if you could find more recruits. Having a male battalion would be good as well, creating some friction between the genders. Add some rewards and punishment, and we can probably see much higher improvements,” she said.

“There’s roughly a week before the third wave appears. I’ll see what I can do during that time,” Zac said. “There’s a meeting within the hour. I could use your input.”

“Very well, I’ll set up the array and have them work on their attributes. They’re quite fragile at the moment, and there’s much room for improvement,” she said.

Zac made the rounds and invited those who needed to be at the meeting before they all convened at Adran’s tent.

“I have gathered everyone here to discuss the coming week,” Zac began as he looked out over the gathered people.

It was the various leaders who were part of planning Port Atwood, but also Sap Trang, Janos, Alea, and Ilvere. He couldn’t find Namys and guessed she was guarding Ogras while he was in seclusion.

“You all should have seen the new people of Port Atwood. They are my first troop who will be training under Alyn,” he began.

“Poor bastards,” Ilvere muttered with a snort, eliciting a few chuckles around the table.

“There is also one of the insectoid beings on the island, called Ibtep,” Zac continued. “Earlier today, I traveled to their island and brokered a tentative peace with them. My wish is to

incorporate them into Port Atwood, as they would be another strong addition to our forces. Their strength was surprisingly high, even though they were stuck on an isolated island with few targets to hunt.

“Even though they had such a disadvantageous starting point, they are born warriors, and their leader is strong enough that maybe only the Ranker and a few more in the world could contend with it,” he said.

The people looked quite surprised at the information, and the surprise only increased as Zac quickly recapped their battle. The surprise turned to shock when he explained Zhix society, and that the Holiness was only in charge of this small hive, while there were leaders of huge hives out there in the world.

“It’s lucky that they will attack anything with Cosmic Energy, as that puts them against the invasions as well, but I think you humans are in for trouble in the future unless you manage to broker peace. I recommend making use of the hive, turning them into ambassadors for other hives in the future. Not all hives will be on the brink of starvation and as open to communication as this one was,” Ilvere said.

“Ibtep is here for that very purpose. Show them around, and teach them about Cosmic Energy. I think the first step we need to take is to normalize the energy in the world so they don’t think of it as corruption and us as Fallen or Dominators,” Zac agreed.

“But do not tell them anything about the incoming monster horde. I don’t want to risk them taking the opportunity to attack from a second front while we are already besieged. I also need you to figure out a way for us to be warned if they actually start digging toward the island. Something with vibrations, maybe? Like how the earth mages felt the vibrations from the Ayn ants digging.”

What followed was some discussion regarding who’d be responsible to be the main liaison to Ibtep and the Zhix. Zac couldn’t keep going back and forth or answer all the questions, as he was busy with so many other things.



In the end, it fell upon Zakarith to take care of it. She had been trained to become a merchant, which included both the language skills and knowledge of how to converse with people of various cultures. In fact, she seemed pretty excited at the prospect of getting some real responsibilities instead of just babysitting the first group of humans.

“Next on the docket is my last trip,” Zac said as he changed the subject.

He briefly recounted the events during his trip, skipping over any sensitive information about his family.

“My goal is to get to the border towns of the undead incursion as soon as possible. Toward that end, I will finish the last horde as fast as humanly possible. There will be no ten-day grind spree. Everyone has already gained years of wealth from the first two hordes; it is time for me to properly establish a force,” he said as he looked out over the group.

The warriors looked disappointed, but the others were generally positive. There were so many projects regarding the town that were put on hold due to the looming threat of the hordes, but as soon as they were dealt with, the town building could begin in earnest.

The reason Zac wanted to move as quickly as possible was because he wasn't willing to wait around any more in his search for Kenzie. He didn't wish for his experience in Greenworth to repeat.

“I believe your best opportunity in the short run is the auction you mentioned in three days,” Adran said after some deliberation. “Both for your personal goals and for Port Atwood.”

“Oh? How so?” Zac asked, intrigued.

“It sounds like your human leaders are putting on a big show for some reason. They likely have some goal in mind with gathering so many elites into one spot.”

Zac nodded in agreement. What Adran said was definitely in line with his own beliefs and the information from the broker.

“That means there won’t be only locals there. If they have a public array, they likely have multiple private ones. They wouldn’t open up an array to the public unless they felt safe doing so, and having reinforcements come from various towns around the world would generally do the trick.”

“I believe that the auction is announced to local powerhouses at most government towns around the world, and the powerhouses who wish to go will use the private teleporters to get there. Their opening up the portal to the public two weeks before is likely in an attempt to find various unaffiliated forces like ourselves,” the administrator continued.

Zac hadn’t even considered that fact, not having analyzed Julia’s words too hard. She’d said that they had a teleporter since they were ahead of the curve, and Zac took it at face value. But there was nothing to say that there weren’t multiple towns around the world that had private teleporters. If a somewhat small village like Winterleaf Village could pool their resources to build the array, then so could the government-owned towns.

“What you’re saying is only making me less willing to go, not more,” Zac said skeptically.

“Well, it is a risk, but also an opportunity. First of all, you might find some force that is located near the undead incursion. That way, you can both gain more in-depth information and perhaps even gain access to their teleporter and save months of travel time,” he said.

“This also sounds like a great opportunity to make a great deal of money,” Zakarith added. “Natives seldom know the worth of many treasures, often since they might not be useful in the beginning when everyone is weak. Those treasures might only show their worth when making E-grade gear or trying to break through bottlenecks.”

“So you’re saying we should go there and gobble up any treasures that humanity has no way to evaluate at the moment?” Zac asked, his heartbeat slightly speeding up in anticipation. No one hated making a lot of money.

“Precisely,” the demoness said with an impish smile.

“Well, it’s fine by me, but I don’t think I can learn all these kinds of things myself. I would either have to bring one of you or one of the Sky Gnomes. Can I even take the gnomes with me through the teleporter?” Zac said.

Everyone looked around, hesitant, not sure about the answer.

“I think... yes?” Zakarith finally said with some uncertainty. “There are restrictions to their activities, but if the purpose is mercantile, such as attending an auction, I think it is fine? But you need to check it out with them, though.”

“Young master would go,” Janos suddenly said.

“Huh?” Zac eventually muttered after failing to decrypt the Illusionist’s terse sentence structure.

“Well... Ogras kind of loves auctions...” Ilvere said with some hesitation, and it looked like a light dawned in the eyes of most of the old clan members of Azh’Rezak. “He was somewhat known to attend various auctions, spending his grandfather’s money. I believe that trait of his was not part of his fake persona. He would definitely want to go if he is out of seclusion by then.”

Zac started to feel a headache as he imagined the haughty demon running around rampant in New Washington. If his current relationship with the government was strained now, he couldn’t imagine the demon making it better.

He truly hoped the demon would still be in seclusion in three days. Then again, bringing the crafty demon might be even better than bringing Sap Trang. It would probably be more beneficial having him take care of any negotiations with the government.

“Well, he’s busy at the moment, so we’ll see how it goes,” Zac said noncommittally.

“The last thing I want to discuss is what to do about all the refugees scattered about our neighboring islands. It’s time to make Port Atwood a proper town.”



## EXCURSION

“I am thinking of extending an invitation to the various people in the area after the third wave is dealt with,” Zac began. “However, are there any groups that might not make it until then?”

It was a fair question, as the refugees he’d taken in last time had been forced to set sail since conditions became too harsh on their island. Since then, a few weeks had passed, and things were only getting worse out in the wild.

“There are three settlements we can bring back before the auction, and another two before the last wave,” Mr. Trang said after some deliberation. “All of them are teetering on the edge of destruction, and they did not seem very organized. There were no real fortifications around their settlements, and the beasts must have done a number on them. However, we can’t take too many in each trip with our vessels, fifteen to twenty people at the most per vessel.”

Zac sighed but nodded, indicating that they’d follow Sap Trang’s lead. It was pretty clear that the groups they’d pick up before battle wouldn’t be able to contribute to the war efforts.

“Is there any force that seemed strong among them?” Zac asked.

“Both beastman camps looked pretty strong,” Mr. Trang said. “There was also one human town that was... odd.”

“Odd how?”

“I’m not sure; it wasn’t me who went there. It was the largest human settlement. They looked quite organized, and no

one seemed to be starving. However, Mr. Nguyen said it was very eerie.”

“Eerie?” Zac asked doubtfully, to which Mr. Trang shrugged his shoulders.

“Fetch those who went on that expedition,” Zac said after some deliberation.

If it was one of the small camps that was a bit off, then it was okay. But if it was the largest one, he might need to intervene early.

Soon a couple of demon soldiers and a very nervous old fisherman stood in front of Zac and the others.

“Can you explain what was odd about the town?” Zac said as he looked them over.

The scouts hesitantly looked at each other until one of the demons from the expedition spoke up.

“I can’t say for sure... It was just a feeling, like there was something wrong about the people,” he said.

“There were no children,” another demon added after some additional silence.

Zac didn’t react for a few seconds before he gave a start at that. He had not really thought about it, since there naturally were no children in Port Atwood, but he realized that wasn’t really normal in a large settlement.

Children had had a rough time of it in general since the integration. The System awarded them no special protections, not even those who had the potential to become cultivators, letting them fend for themselves. The only exception was that children below the age of seven were teleported with their parents if they entered the Tutorial. Of course they weren’t part of the missions but were placed safely to the side.

Otherwise, the System was uncaring about the children of Earth, and it was the same in the whole Multiverse. But the old factions and forces had established order long ago. Their towns weren’t on the brink of destruction from some monster hordes, and there was functioning training infrastructure

within clans and at academies that would protect and prepare the young until they could gain strength. Children were seen as a resource and fiercely guarded, as it only took one genius or powerhouse to elevate a whole clan to a new level, and each child held that potential.

On Earth, the adults could at least get stronger to defend themselves, but children could only hope their parents were still around to protect them. Zac heard that the government was trying to set something up for the young, but it was still in the planning stages, from what he understood. Many were already calling those below sixteen when the integration came “the Lost Generation,” and Zac felt it was fitting.

Emily was part of the lost generation, though she was a bit better off with at least being fifteen when the integration had happened. But her fate before meeting Zac was indicative of how powerless children were in this new world.

Zac had seen children in both New Washington and Greenworth, though they were generally accompanied by their parents. But if all the children of a whole settlement were missing, as the scouts had indicated, something nefarious might be going on.

There was no real proof, however, only some circumstantial odd facts, and since the people were both protected and looked fed, he couldn't use his limited time on that settlement. He would have to check it out after the last wave.

Everything was dealt with by now, and the meeting was soon adjourned, and only an hour later, four ships set sail together, with Zac standing on the fore of one of them. They were heading toward one of the islands that required immediate help, and Zac came along since he wanted to see the situation for himself. There was not much for him to do apart from pondering on the Dao at the moment in any case, and he could do that while sitting on a boat.

Zac wasn't the only human on the vessels. He not only brought Sap Trang with him, but also a few of the stronger girls to give them some experience, and to let the refugees not

only see people with horns. All of them, Mr. Trang included, were currently sitting down, absorbing Nexus Crystals, not letting a second go to waste.

The island they were heading for was about three hours away, and when they arrived, Zac saw that it looked about the same as any tropical island. This one was even smaller than the Zhix island, though there was no mountain taking up most of the space. They sailed around the shore for a few minutes until a rundown town came into view.

It became increasingly clear that most of the settlements were various coastal towns taken from around the world and placed on their own islands. Zac had to assume that the patch of forest he had been located in before the integration had been added on to the main island to increase its size.

The town looked quite colonial in its architecture, and Zac guessed it was from some island in the Caribbean. The town might have been the type of idyllic place you saw on postcards back in the day, with brightly colored houses and beautiful cobblestone paths, but now it gave off a far more dour feeling.

Many buildings were marred with scratches and cracks, and some even had splotches of blood on them. It looked like only part of the town had been randomized to this location, as it seemed that the part with any marina or harbor was missing. The section in front of them was mainly lined with beautiful pristine beaches, making it seem like a perfect tourist destination.

The four Creator vessels simply ran up on the beach itself, their inscribed hulls taking no damage at all from the somewhat rough landing. The eight people Zac brought for the expedition swiftly jumped off and were led by one of the demons who'd initially scouted the town.

“There are a few fortified buildings in the center. We think most of the survivors are holed up there,” the demon said.

Soon they reached the buildings the demon mentioned, and Zac saw it was likely once a small hotel that had been turned into a base. It was lined with a simple wall of sacks filled with sand, and spikes were erected among them.



It was also clear that the place was populated since the hotel was currently under attack by gigantic rats. A quick glance at Sap Trang showed him blanching, perhaps remembering his own ordeals. Zac wondered if this kind of vermin had some sort of advantage, as overgrown rats were a problem in almost all settlements, from what he'd heard.

Having the capability to quickly grow in numbers was a huge asset when Cosmic Energy ensured that anything would grow large. Even if a bear got stronger, it might only have a few cubs in its lifetime, whereas a rat could have hundreds of kids.

Zac could see a few people desperately fending off the rat tide that pushed against the defenses. There were a few breaches where a few people desperately swung everything from clubs to frying pans in an effort to keep the monsters outside the perimeter. The rats were around level 15 to 25, and Zac felt it was decent target practice for the Valkyries.

“Go help them out,” Zac said as he stayed put. The monsters weren't too numerous, and there was no point in him or the demons going out and stealing the experience.

Soon the three girls and Sap Trang were wildly swinging against the rats, quickly getting splashed in rat blood. Zac saw that Mr. Trang now was using a sword resembling a cutlass. With his old patchy clothes and leathery skin, he looked very much the part of an elderly pirate. Every now and then, he also unleashed a few small waterspouts that impaled the rats, but it didn't look very effective. Likely the skill would be stronger if he were at sea and had free water to use.

In just a few minutes, most of the horde was dealt with, and Zac felt it was enough at this point. He walked up close to the battlements and simply released his aura. Pandemonium erupted among the surviving rats, and with panicked screeches, they fled in all directions.

Zac quickly retracted his aura and looked over his panting soldiers.

“Good job,” he said with a small smile as he saw them looking down with disgust at their drenched bodies. “You'll

have to wipe that grime off before we return. I don't want rat blood all over my ships."

Afterward, he turned to the people hiding behind the battlements or peering out from windows of the hotel.

"Hello, I'm Zac. I understand you requested some help from my scouts the other day," he said to the people of the island.

He could hear some muted voices for a bit until a man spoke up.

"Are you from some government?"

"No. They are an endless distance away on the mainland, and they're barely able to maintain order in their own towns, let alone send out rescue missions to our archipelago," Zac said.

They seemed disappointed in the news, but a few people still stepped out from the barricades, warily hefting their makeshift weapons.

"What's the catch?" one of the women suddenly asked. "We're all fighting for our lives here. I don't believe you're just traveling around the sea to save people."

"I need workers. I am building a town from scratch and need everything from farmers to fishermen to local business owners," Zac said. "Of course, if you want to keep fighting, that is more than welcome. Warriors are always needed in this messed-up world. But let me be clear; there is no social security, no freebies. There are no monsters and no risk to your lives in my town, but I have no use for freeloaders."

They all perked up when he mentioned the safety. Zac didn't mention anything about the third wave, feeling that it would only complicate things.

"Besides, how long can you stay like you are? You barely fended off these little guys," he said as he waved at the rat carcasses. "The monsters will keep getting tougher, and there is safety in numbers."

It didn't take much more convincing than that, and soon four Creator vessels filled to the rafters with refugees were heading back to Port Atwood.



## FINAL PREPARATIONS

Zac sat in a secluded area of the academy with his eyes closed. They'd returned yesterday with the first batch of citizens, with them being given a brief introduction while they sailed. The demons' appearance once again caused quite a stir, but since they were stuck on a boat with open ocean all around, they couldn't just run away. After some talking down, they were somewhat okay since both Zac and the warriors who fought the rats were human, after all.

Almost as soon as they arrived at Port Atwood, the boats set out again for the next island. If they were going to rescue all the groups before the third wave started, they would have to essentially keep sailing around the clock. There was the option of buying a larger transport vessel from the Creators, but they cost over 10 million Nexus Coins.

Zac could afford it, but he wanted to hold on to his money with both the auction and the third wave coming up. Zac didn't join the following expeditions, instead choosing to focus on his meditation. The new townspeople were mainly guided around by Megan and her group.

Megan and the others had quickly improved their attitude since Zac had brought the women from Greenworth. Zac hadn't given any order to keep the state of the world secret, and soon everyone on the island knew about how much the world had actually fallen. Emily had already told them as much, but she was considered biased since she essentially lived a cushy life in Zac's mansion.

But hearing one horror story after another helped the former refugees realize that being stuck on this island wasn't too bad. There was food, and there was safety. There was even a steady amount of Nexus Crystals available for purchase, so they could quickly advance in levels without risking their lives. Zac was even providing them with a modest salary as long as they completed their daily tasks.

Currently, it came out of Zac's own pocket, but as soon as he became a Lord, he could start taxing his citizens. At that point, he'd want as many citizens as possible to add value to the town.

Instead of helping out with the rescue efforts, Zac went to the gravity array in the academy. His original plan had been to focus on the Dao of Sharpness, but his recent inspiration into Heaviness in Greenworth had changed his mind. He chose to sit and meditate in the gravity array cranked to the max since he thought the feeling of heavy pressure all over might assist him in his venture.

He'd been sitting there for almost a full day by now and finally got up to his feet and stretched. The improved array brought the pressure up to twenty-five times the normal amount and could cover a large field rather than just the small camp. The trainees still normally trained in ten times the gravity, though, since they generally collapsed in a heap when they tried anything higher than that.

He nodded toward Alyn, who was busy screaming at one of the girls as he walked away. During his day in the array, he would sometimes spectate the training while he was resting. What he'd seen had been quite jarring. He could understand why the woman had been fired from her teaching position since she truly held nothing back when she was instructing these people.

She normally was very calm and wore a smiling face, just like when she had been teaching him in the caves. But she could also explode into a furious tirade when someone didn't live up to her expectations. Her verbal assaults could even put most drill sergeants to shame. That wasn't all, she had even gotten hold of a tool that could best be described as a grenade.

It was a small inscription powered by a single Nexus Crystal that exploded in a concussion wave when thrown. It would blast away any unaware person, though not dealing any real damage. She used it any time she felt someone was lazing about. Worse yet, Zac learned that the cost of the bomb came out of the pocket of the one she attacked. He considered stopping her then and there, but judging by the reactions of the recruits, they didn't mind, and it only spurred them on further.

He went to the Thayer Consortium next, and an excited Calrin moved to welcome him.

“Lord Atwood, it is good to see you. I hope the pills I procured for you met your expectations,” he said, his eyes shining with greed. “Incidentally, I heard a customer mention an auction taking place soon?”

Zac's mouth couldn't help tugging upward as he looked down at the little Sky Gnome, who was almost bouncing around in excitement.

“I thought you couldn't leave this compound. Why is this of interest to you?”

“We're not some prisoners. We can leave the building anytime we want, but most of our family are quite weak. Once upon a time, we had mighty warriors to protect the Thayer Clan, but all of them defected, not wanting to impact their future cultivation. Shortsighted fools,” he explained in a huff.

“We can leave anytime, though we generally need to stay within your town. We have the same restrictions as all other foreigners on this emerging planet, and our special protections don't expand outside our buildings. We are also barred from various things, such as most types of quests and procuring land,” he explained. “However, I actually got a quest! A money-making quest! I can leave with you and go to the auction. Who knows what precious things you idi—ehm, you newly integrated humans will sell off for a fraction of their value,” Calrin exclaimed.

It looked like his reason for visiting the consortium had sorted itself out.

“Very well, you can come with me. I need someone who can spot the valuables, after all. However, you are representing Port Atwood and the Thayer Consortium, not just yourself. You might also need to assist in negotiations,” Zac said.

He wondered what reactions the little blue gnome would elicit, but he didn't really mind exposing him since he was just a mercantile user whose origins were easily explainable. He was not only good at sniffing out treasures, but he was also quite a talker and could maybe help smooth out Port Atwood's somewhat harsh first impression.

As he walked back toward the inner area, he quickly heard the bustling noise of activity. Since only the inner wall was completed, the real construction of the town couldn't start yet. Anything built in the future residential or crafting districts would likely be reduced to rubble as soon as the next wave arrived. All the new citizens would need a temporary place to stay, though, and a large number of buildings were being added to the temporary town inside the walls.

As he walked the streets, he saw many unfamiliar faces. It was the refugees who were continuously pouring in from the ships shuttling back and forth between islands. As more and more humans joined the town, the shock the demons created was getting smaller. Still, many had just arrived and glanced curiously or fearfully at the demons who passed them by.

The infusion of people was quickly increasing the liveliness of the town, especially as he even heard some children's laughter as he walked. He curiously looked over and saw a few children actually gather some distance away from the Zhix, with their parents fearfully keeping them from rushing up to them.

Zac was surprised to see the insectoid actually being able to wave their antennae, and they kept waving them at the children, who excitedly waved back. Ibtap also held a large larva in a hand, but it was clear no one was interested in their greeting gift.

As soon as the Zhix spotted Zac, they perked up and put the larva away as they walked over, the two demon guards



following closely in tow, both balefully glaring at the insectoid. Zac briefly wondered if there would actually be people who would take the Zhix's offer of combat to the death.

"Greetings. I have something to discuss with you if you have the time?" Ibtep said as they closed in on Zac.

"Sure, let's head over there," Zac said as he pointed toward Adran's command tent, which was just around the corner.

Soon they found themselves at a table in a partition of the large tent.

"I have walked among your kind and the horned ones for two days, and I can almost certainly conclude that you truly are not part of the Dominators or the Fallen," the Zhix started.

"Uh, thanks, I guess?" Zac said with some confusion.

"I would like to report back to my island, detailing my findings. I understand your vessels are continuously moving between islands, and would like to ride along," they said.

"You're heading home already?" Zac asked.

"No, I would still like to keep observing, so I would hope that you can pick me up again as well. More importantly, I wish to join your expedition through the magic transfer construction," they said.

"The first part is no problem, but the second part... uh... might be a problem. The last time Zhix teleported to where we are going, they went berserk and started killing everyone," Zac said hesitantly.

"It sounds correct. Zealots passing through the array for a death assault against the Dominators. Their progeny will be well taken care of. Of course, a misguided action in this new world. However, I find it very troubling that there is a Zhix settlement that has so readily built such a transfer device," Ibtep said.

"Troubling why?" Zac asked, confused.

"I explained what happened with our so-called Nexus Node. The Holiness sealed it away since it was overflowing with corruption. Most of the Anointed should have acted the

same, avoiding usage of such a device. That a hive already is using it to the degree of sending out death assaults is... a problem.

“Either they are even more open-minded than us. That is unlikely since what the Holiness did by speaking to you was unprecedented. If our situation weren’t so dire, you would have been assaulted to our last man. The other alternative is... that the hive is not averse to using corruption,” Ibtep said with a frown.

“You’re saying that they might be the so-called Dominators from your old world? Didn’t you say they were eradicated in a great war?”

“That’s the official belief, but there should be traitors surviving. The power of corruption has always been alluring,” Ibtep said.

“I don’t understand what this has to do with you coming with me?” Zac questioned skeptically.

“I wish to find out more about the other hives, and information here is limited. It seems I also need to warn you humans about the Dominators, for both our sakes,” Ibtep said with some worry.

“Why do you believe that they will be such a problem that humanity needs to be warned? They sound dangerous, but everyone is getting powerful, erasing their advantage,” Zac asked, feeling a bit unconvinced. “Besides, your kind already defeated them without any power.”

“Well, I will breach a precept since I think this is too important not to discuss. Discussing the powers of the Anointed is taboo, but you should know we have a Ladder just like you. Most on the Ladder are the Anointed, since between administering rites and their natural superior constitution, they should be far more suited to this new world than you or me.

“However, there are a few who have not shown their true names, using various pseudonyms. Some thought before it was due to shame, not wanting to show how many of their hives had died under their watch since every death makes the

Anointed stronger. In fact, the top three names on our Power Ladder all use pseudonyms.

“But there has always been another possibility. Those with the fake names might be the Dominator traitors, who were afraid to be exposed. That would explain why their power is higher. They started already being full of corruption before the integration,” Ibtap concluded.

“I still don’t see your point?” Zac probed.

“Those with pseudonyms are all around level 100.”



## THE MOTLEY CREW

“WHAT?!” Zac asked, shocked. “That’s impossible.”

He wasn’t saying that without any reason. He had proof in the form of his own titles. He had been the first to reach level 25 and attain a class, and it was just impossible that someone not only caught up to him, but even gained another fifty levels.

“Can you please show me? I need to verify the truth of it,” Zac finally said.

After explaining how to show status screens or other menus of the System, he soon blankly stared at a small hovering box.

### **[3. Inevitability. Level 98]**

The Zhix was unwilling to share the whole list, but that single line was all Zac needed to know the Zhix wasn’t lying.

“Holy shit...” Zac eventually spat after he finally came to terms with the explosive news.

Countless questions whirled in his head suddenly, the foremost one being how the hell this was possible. The only explanation he could come up with was that these Dominators didn’t start at level 1 since they’d already used Cosmic Energy before the integration. He actually had no idea what happened in that case, and the missive didn’t really say anything about it either. It did, however, mention that sometimes the invaders encountered extremely strong resistance.

As for the titles, they were either split up between the races like the Ladder, or old cultivators weren’t eligible for them.

Zac really hoped it was the latter since it was bad enough if the Dominators were level 100 E-grade powerhouses. If they also had the “First” titles along with all their big percentage bonuses, then Zac might as well pack it up and look for ways to get off this planet.

Level 100 was no joking matter. It was a full twenty-five levels past the bottleneck at 75. Since they were actually past the bottleneck, it meant that they all held Dao Seeds and an E-grade class by now. Not only that, the improvements per level after the bottleneck were a lot larger compared to before. They would be in a completely different league compared to beasts like the Fiend Wolf he’d fought earlier, who barely had passed the threshold.

If you combined that fact together with the extremely strong bodies the leaders seemed to possess, it made a truly terrifying image. He held no illusions that he’d be able to defeat something at level 100, even with all his titles, especially not considering their natural endowments.

With that amount of power, they were even a larger threat than the incursions. After all, they didn’t just possess monstrous individual power, they also had large Zhix hives full of zealous warriors who were happy to go on a rampage against anything with Cosmic Energy. He even suspected that many had no idea they were following a so-called Dominator since they clearly were hiding and biding their time for some purpose.

“I think you understand my worry. I need to gather more information, and hopefully, we can warn other hives,” Ibtep said.

Though it was a risk, Zac felt he had no choice but to bring Ibtep by this point. The Zhix was right; humans needed to be aware of this fact. And a real walking and talking Zhix would be far more effective than just him saying it without any real proof.

“Okay, you can come. Talk to Adran and get a crystal for the language skill [**Book of Babel**]. Otherwise, the humans won’t understand your words. We leave in the morning in two

days, so make sure you finish your report home before that,” Zac finally relented.

The crystals came from various demons who bought it at the contribution shop and then traded it for Nexus Crystals or Nexus Coins with Adran. Since Zac felt it was an extremely important skill, and Calrin still wasn't able to buy a batch through the Mercantile System, he offered quite generous prices for them.

“Oh, and figure out a way to pass the message to the hives without anyone approaching. There are few humans who are willing to do what I did, and force themselves into a hive to leave a message. We can probably drop a message down from the sky or shoot it at them from a long distance, though,” Zac added after some thought.

The next day was quite uneventful, as Zac simply trained most of the time except when he went back to his mansion to eat something and perhaps watch some movies. The new building held a proper viewing room almost looking like a luxurious cinema, except for the fact that there were large soft leather couches placed in groups and a myriad of pelts and pillows created with soft wolf fur. Unfortunately, with the new looming threat, it was hard to relax, even with his improved living conditions.

Finally, the day of the auction arrived, and Zac got himself ready. This time, he didn't wear any shoes, as he didn't know what would happen when a blue gnome and a Zhix stepped through the teleporter, and he needed to be able to block a potential attack.

He'd already handed the Zhix one of the armors that held a single defensive charge through an inscription, the very same type that he'd used in the beginning before he got his upgrade. As for the little gnome, he wasn't as worried, since he was quite sure that many of the various items he wore were defensive treasures.

He said goodbye to a brooding Emily, who was angry she wasn't allowed to come with them this time either, and headed toward the array. Everyone else was already waiting outside

the teleportation building, the Zhix once again donning their huge backpack instead of using the Cosmos Sack.

It wasn't the first time he did it, and when Zac asked why the first time, Ibtep explained that his snacks couldn't enter the pouch while they were fresh.

"I hear there are exciting things going on. Count me in," Zac suddenly heard as the shadows of the building congealed into a familiar person.

Zac felt a headache coming on as he saw Ogras emerge with an excited face.

"I thought you were busy training," Zac sighed.

"It's all done. I can't leave all the fun to you and that little blue bastard," he said with a sneer at Calrin, who responded with a gesture that Zac could only assume was offensive.

"What about your identity?"

"I got the report from Ilvere. There are supposedly four worlds that got knocked together, right? So why shouldn't there be a fourth species? I'll just say that we didn't spawn in your mainland area since we prefer hotter climates. That should match well with your silly old depictions of us demons," Ogras said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

Clearly, nothing would detract him from joining in on the fun.

"Hello, demon leader. I am Ibtep, ambassador of the Zhix. Would you like a snack?" the Zhix suddenly said as they walked up with a large squirming larva in their hand. "It's freshly caught."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Ogras. Here's a fruit that you can't find on this world. Give it a try," the demon responded as he took out a nasty-looking thing from his Cosmos Sack.

The fruit looked twisted and shrunken and had quite an acrid smell. It wasn't anything Zac had seen before and, more importantly, was not something he'd ever put in his mouth. He suspected it was a prank Ogras pulled as a response to being fed insects, but clearly, the Zhix didn't mind. Soon the two of



them were munching away, and Zac wasn't sure who he should be more grossed out at.

“Um, Ibtep, why do you keep offering... snacks to people?” Zac couldn't help asking, as Ibtep and their larva were starting to become a talking point in Port Atwood.

“I learned this trick from the previous Anointed. If you need to make a good impression, offer the other party a snack, and they will be more amenable afterward,” Ibtep said with some pride in their eyes. Zac had to admit that it made some sense, though the Zhix might need to change what was considered a snack.

Zac was silently looking over his small team who would represent Port Atwood, and couldn't help but start sweating. He wasn't sure whether the team looked like an alien invasion or a traveling circus. They were only missing Karunthel, the Creator Foreman with his monstrous spider legs, to round out the image. Sap Trang seemed to understand what was going through his mind, and he wryly smiled with a helpless shrug.

Zac still brought the old fisherman, as he wanted to have someone represent humans, and not just bring aliens, and it felt even more poignant now with Ogras entering the fray. Mr. Trang had even gotten a makeover for the occasion, now donning clothes similar to the E-grade robes Zac wore. Of course, they were without the powerful inscriptions.

Zac shook his head as he mentally prepared for the chaos his group would cause by their appearance, before he turned toward the array.

“Wait a few seconds before entering. I have to warn them or something. And don't do anything stupid,” he said as he activated the array.

In a short moment, he once again arrived in New Washington. To his surprise, he found himself in another building compared to the one he'd arrived in last time. They had moved the array from the claustrophobic little room without windows into a huge lobby.

For a second, he felt like he was at an airport, as in front of him, there was a security checkpoint. There was a counter with thick bulletproof glass, and a person sat behind it. There were also quite a few soldiers walking around, and a prickling sensation told him that a gun was pointed at him from some hidden angle.

Before he had time to do much of anything, a man rushed toward him.

“Mr. Monk, it is good to see you again. I am Adam. We have be—” the man began, but Zac quickly spoke over him.

“Sorry to interrupt, but instruct your soldiers not to fire. A few more are arriving from Port Atwood, and they are not human,” Zac quickly said.

The man looked surprised but acted quickly as he turned around and shouted a few orders.

Not long after, the array flashed again, and the party arrived one by one. The first who entered was Mr. Trang, making the greeter throw a confused glance at Zac. However, with every new person emerging after Sap, his eyes widened a bit further.

The last to emerge through the teleporter was Ibtep, who curiously glanced around until their eyes landed on Adam, who by now was openly gaping as he stared at the odd party. Any activity had stopped in the lobby as well, as everyone was warily looking at the group, the silence almost palpable.

The Zhix didn't hesitate and resolutely walked up to Adam, making many aim their weapons at Ibtep.

“Hello, human leader. Would you like a snack?” they said, holding a large wriggling grub up to the startled man.

“This is Ibtep; they're a part of Port Atwood and not an enemy,” Zac quickly added.

“Ah... uh... Well, welcome, everyone,” Adam managed to say as he hesitantly accepted the large larva. “I am sorry, but could you please wait here? I am not sure about the protocols when encountering new species. I need to contact my superiors.”

“That’s fine,” Zac said and ushered the group to a section of sofas close by.

“What’s with all these rules and regulations?” Ogras muttered in annoyance, but he still went with the others. “It shouldn’t be so complicated. If people make trouble after arriving, kill them. If not, leave them be.”

“Basic bureaucracy is a cornerstone of a civilized society,” Calrin said after casting a scathing glance at the demon. “Not like you demons would understand, with your clusters being lawless hellholes.”

Ogras didn’t seem to mind and only grinned back at the gnome. “What other laws do you need except the law of the jungle?” he retorted.

The two had developed a rapport over the months that made Zac unsure whether they were good friends or bitter enemies. It was clear that the two were gearing up for an argument, but luckily, something interrupted them.

The teleportation array flashed into life once again, and not long after, a group of people emerged. They all wore high-quality gear that Zac assumed could only be bought through the System, as he could see fractals on various spots.

There were three of them, with the one in the front being an elderly man in at least his sixties. However, he looked to be in good vigor with sharp eyes and a ramrod-straight back. His beard and hair were meticulously cut, and he even radiated a bit of an aura. Everything about him oozed authority, and Zac guessed he was someone in power before the fall. Either a prominent businessman or a politician.

Another man looked like a bodyguard, warily looking around. He also had a large shield fastened to his back, and Zac assumed he was able to equip it at a moment’s notice if needed. When the man saw Zac and the others, his brows furrowed, and he slightly repositioned himself toward them.

His movements were ignored by the old man, who looked straight ahead, but they were noticed by the last person, a woman somewhere in her twenties. She was quite tall,

reaching over 170 cm, and she seemed to possess an almost feline grace. Her movements reminded Zac of the demon scout he'd fought long ago. She had been slippery as an eel, freely moving through the treetops as easily as walking on the ground. But the woman in front of Zac right now gave even him a distinct sense of danger, far more than any human he'd met thus far.

She was beautiful, but not overly so. She had a few shallow scars on her hands and face, and her shoulder-length blond hair was tied in a tight braid that screamed of practicality rather than finesse. The most memorable thing about her, however, was her piercing blue eyes. She looked quite intrigued as she glanced at their odd group, particularly at Ogras and Calrin.

“Grandpa,” the girl softly said, bringing the old man’s attention to Zac and his group.

When he saw Zac’s motley crew, his face changed for the first time since exiting the teleportation array. The trio was clearly known to the people of New Washington, as another representative hurried up to them and wanted to show them the way out.

However, the old man simply ignored the liaison and walked toward the sofa group.



## THE MARSHALL CLAN

The old man stopped a few meters away from Zac's group, slowly looking over each and every one with a frown.

"Humanity is on the brink of extinction, and you're consorting with the enemy?" he said with a terse voice.

"Allies are allies; enemies are enemies. Why bring race into it?" Sap Trang answered with a congenial smile. "We old folk need to learn to embrace change in this new world if we wish our children to flourish in the future."

The old man only snorted and left it at that, leaving with his two companions in tow. The girl took a last glance at the party before they passed the security checkpoint and exited the area.

Zac looked over at his company but saw that none of them had taken offense at the words. Calrin didn't care, since there was no money involved, and Ibtep kept looking around the structure with fascination. As for Ogras, he seemed to consider the short exchange a form of entertainment.

"Finally some interesting things are happening after all these dull months," he said with a smile.

Zac only sighed in response, thankful he had Mr. Trang with him to take care of things. They didn't have to wait long until he saw Julia rush toward them.

"Mr. Monk, it is good to see you again. You never told us that Port Atwood was such a... cultural melting pot," she said with a forced smile.

“Well, as I said, we’re living in an isolated place, and we needed to cooperate to survive,” Zac answered with a shrug. “We just spoke with an interesting group led by an old man. Who were they?”

“They, ah, are VIP guests,” she said and leaned over after glancing around and continued in a whisper. “They were the Marshall Clan. As in Thea Marshall, the strongest woman in the world. That was her in the flesh,” she whispered, unable to hide her excitement.

“The strongest woman, huh? Too bad she’s a bit plain,” Ogras said with a sigh.

“This is Ogras Azh’Rezak, the, uh, representative for the demons of Port Atwood,” Zac said with a sigh.

“I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Azh’Rezak. Welcome to New Washington, the beacon of humanity,” Julia said with a smile, seemingly unperturbed to see a foreign species.

“The mapping of our new planet is a bit limited, and we have yet to encounter either you or your other friend’s kind before,” she asked, obviously hoping for some sort of explanation, but Ogras only smiled in response.

“Calrin Thayer of Thayer Consortium. From the moment I laid my eyes on you, I felt you were a woman of principle and discerning taste. I am therefore extending a ten-percent discount on your first purchase in one of our stores as a greeting gift,” the gnome said as he stood up and made a simile of an aristocrat’s bow.

“How generous, thank you. I hope to visit your store soon. I unfortunately have nothing to offer except this pamphlet about the rules and regulations of New Wash—” Julia said while handing out a brochure, but stopped herself and looked over at Ibtep, who had stood up and moved toward her during the conversation.

“Hello, female human. I am Ibtep, ambassador of the Anointed. At your convenience, I’d like to discuss matters of grave importance. Also, please accept this snack as a greeting

gift,” they solemnly said, this time holding up a decently large caterpillar.

Julia blanched when she saw the wiggling insect, almost going so far as taking a step away.

“I am afraid I can’t accept this gift of yours. Unfortunately, I am a bit sick and have trouble eating at the moment. However, we are very much open for a dialogue. We have been hoping to establish diplomatic relations with the Zhix for some time.”

“That leaves Mr. Trang. He represents the humans of Port Atwood.” Zac finished his introduction, and Julia cordially greeted him as well before turning back to Zac.

“And what is your responsibility?” Julia asked with a questioning glance.

“Uh... spiritual guidance?” Zac answered as he scratched the back of his head, prompting a snort from the demon.

His head wasn’t bald like a monk’s anymore, but it was still extremely short. Apparently, hair grew slower and slower as Vitality increased, rather than the opposite. It had something to do with the fact that hair was made from dead cells, and cells died at a much slower rate for the evolved.

It was possible to quickly grow it out again with the help of Cosmic Energy, but he felt it was more convenient to let it be, as it both saved time on maintenance and he wouldn’t get anything in his eyes during battle.

Julia clearly looked skeptical at Zac’s supposed function in the group, but let it be.

“With your identities being a bit unique, we unfortunately can’t let your group venture out into the town until all details have been confirmed. However, I will personally take you to the venue for the auction,” she said.

“This way, uh, gentlemen; the auction is starting soon, and you are amongst the last to arrive,” Julia continued as she guided them out of the building.



“Oh? There are many parties that have arrived through the teleporter?” Sap Trang asked curiously.

“There are a surprising number of forces around the world that have a private teleporter. It is unfortunate, in a way. There is a huge network of Nodes across the world that could assist humanity’s war efforts, but it’s currently not usable,” Julia answered, skirting any actual numbers.

All of the people, even Mr. Trang, curiously glanced all around, as it was the first time they’d seen a proper human town. Sap Trang was interested as well, as he’d spent most of his life in his small fishing village except for when he was in the army.

“The auction will take place at the National Opera. It is most convenient if we take a car there. Please, this way,” she said as she led them to a limousine that was waiting.

“Your kind has made some interesting things,” Ogras said as he fiddled around with the mini-fridge inside as they drove through the town. “We should bring a few of these things back to Port Atwood.”

“I brought a few back last trip. They are more suited for our terrain than this one,” Zac only answered.

“Excellent.”

“Your hives are quite spread out. It seems inconvenient to defend,” the Zhix commented as they looked out through a window.

“Our defensive systems have evolved over the years to not really depend on things such as walls anymore. However, with the change to our world, building proper fortifications has once again become a priority,” Julia answered with a smile.

After driving for fifteen minutes, they arrived at the venue. There clearly had been some beasts roaming about once upon a time, as there was some damage that had been fixed up at various spots. However, the structure still looked quite grand. The ceilings were over ten meters high, and the whole area was covered in red carpet.

“I will leave you here, as there are quite a few matters I need to arrange. There are spots reserved for you. Just show an attendant this ticket when the auction starts,” Julia said to Zac as she handed him a piece of paper. “Oh, and please remember to... follow the guidelines in the pamphlet. Your party will stand out, but please try to avoid causing conflict. We will speak again after the event.”

With that, she sped away, leaving the group to gawk at the gaudy display. However, there were quite a few hints that the event was not some posh gala. Zac spotted a few military vehicles parked outside, and the entrance was lined with a row of soldiers. There were also dozens of cultivators with various weapons who stood at the ready, decked in riot gear.

There were actually fewer guests than soldiers and attendants, but Zac was still surprised by the numbers as they walked inside. The doors to the actual venue were still closed, so the guests were milling about in the huge lobby, making small talk and mingling. It was an extremely weird contrast, seeing people in armor and swords holding glasses of champagne or eating canapés.

Zac noted with some surprise there were even some groups of Ishiate present, mostly standing by themselves. Zac even spotted a familiar face among their kind, standing by the side of a few other Ishiate, who were similarly dressed in simple but sturdy gear.

It was also the first time he saw the other type of Ishiate, who wore far more urban clothing. Their gear was almost modern, and they even carried rudimentary hot weapons like blunderbusses and muskets. It was clear that the two groups still were at odds, as they stood in two separate cliques.

As Zac and his group made their entrance, a lull in the conversation spread over the floor as most parties curiously looked at them. They likely struck quite the image with three types of aliens and the odd clothing of himself and Mr. Trang. Zac stood out even further as he walked around barefoot, as he refused to lose the ability to use **[Loamwalker]** with this many powerful people around.

“Wow, you humans’ auctions are a bit dull. I don’t see a single fight,” Ogras said as he looked around with some disappointment. “And I’m also starting to wonder if you are mentally sound. Your kind can obviously build decent structures not just in the movies, but you chose to live in a tin can in the woods?”

“I told you I was out camping with friends when the integration happened,” Zac said with a some exasperation.

“I just don’t understand why you would want to pretend-live like a poor person surrounded by trees,” the demon retorted, but let the subject go.

“Okay, it’s almost time for the auction to start. Please behave, and keep information about Port Atwood at the minimum. Mr. Trang, please stay with Ibtep,” Zac said, but immediately groaned when Ogras turned into shadows.

He appeared again next to a startled waiter and snatched up two glasses of champagne and downed them in quick order before starting to walk around. The Sky Gnome didn’t linger either and unhesitantly moved toward a party of humans, likely eager to make some business connections.

He turned around and looked at a helpless Mr. Trang and was about to leave to speak with Selas, who stood amongst the other beastkin, but stopped with a frown as he saw a party heading his way. It only took a second to realize that these people weren’t moving toward him to socialize, but to create trouble. It was also clear that he wasn’t the target, but it was rather the Zhix, who still curiously looked around at the luxurious interior.

Zac felt a wave of vexation, but he knew that this would likely happen sooner or later when he brought Ibtep. The Zhix might not go out of their way to kill people, and mainly holed themselves in their hives, but that didn’t change the fact that quite a few humans had died by their hands since the integration started. It was inevitable that some would want some revenge, even if it was only at the species responsible for the atrocities.

“You have a lot of balls bringing one of those *things* here,” one of the front men growled as he balefully glared at the Zhix.

“I don’t know your history with the Zhix, but we have brought Ibtep here in order to help facilitate peace between our species. Our main priority should be the incursions rather than fighting amongst natives,” Sap Trang said, trying to defuse the situation.

“Hello, human, I am Ibtep,” the Zhix said, ignoring Zac’s attempts to signal them to let Sap Trang talk. “I am sorry there has been some confusion between our people, resulting in accidental deaths. On the bright side, it is only weakness leaving your swarm, making it stronger.”

A groan slipped through Zac’s lip when he heard Ibtep’s greeting. He knew that the Zhix truly thought the words were consoling. The Zhix were really pragmatic in that way, believing that if someone died like that, they couldn’t have been too strong anyway. It was pure Darwinism in a sense, though Zac didn’t feel that type of mindset really worked in this new world with Cosmic Energy.

“What the FUCK is this thing saying? YOU BASTARDS KILLED MY WHOLE HOMETOWN!” another of the threatening men roared, his eyes bulging in anger.

It seemed to have been some sort of signal, as the whole group drew their weapons, all of them radiating strong killing intent.

Seeing that things had reached this point, Zac sighed and brought out his wooden club.



## NEW FRIENDS

The roar put a damper on the conversation in the whole area, and the guests curiously looked at the source of the commotion. Mr. Trang glanced worriedly at Zac, who indicated for the old man to stand back before he moved up next to the two. Mr. Trang's power had improved quite a bit recently; however, Zac sensed that Sap would barely manage to handle one of these people, let alone the whole group. He had to take over from here.

There were also multiple guards, who moved closer with their guns at the ready. However, they didn't seem interested in breaking up the fight, and Zac could understand why. Most of the people in this room were likely powerhouses, and butting in was a good way to get yourself killed. The army was likely there to protect the venue and government officials from attacks rather than mediating disputes between cultivators.

"Let me take it from here, Ibtep," Zac said as he turned toward the group. "Ibtep is not from any hive you have encountered, as their hive hasn't harmed any humans. Our goal is to stop the fighting between our species, so please go away."

"Fuck you, insect-lover," another in the group spat as they all rushed forward.

Zac briefly considered pushing out his aura but decided against it. The Marshalls were in the room, and they should have no problem comparing Thea's power against his, and from there figure out his identity.

Instead, he decided to rely on the same wooden club that he'd used to subdue the Zhix warriors as he walked forward. The air screamed as the club danced through the air with almost impossible speed. There was a quick succession of deep thuds followed by flying bodies, and in just under five seconds, the whole group was lying unconscious spread out on the floor.

Zac grimaced when he saw that most of the eyes in the room suddenly were upon him. Some looked intrigued, others afraid, and some calculating. He even saw the people from the Marshall Clan intently staring at him from a group of sofas in the distance, where they were surrounded by a group of sycophants. It almost felt like the intensive stare of Thea Marshall was going to burn a hole in his head, so he quickly turned away.

“HA HA! GOOD THWONKING!” A booming voice was heard across the whole room as the largest man Zac had ever seen walked toward him, holding a whole tray of canapés.

The man was so huge that Zac wondered if humans could mutate like beasts, growing out of proportion. He was well over two meters tall, and not the thin and wiry type of tall. Thick, bulging muscles covered every inch of him, giving him the impression of a walking behemoth.

He also carried the nastiest weapon Zac had ever seen on his back, a huge club as large as a tree trunk, where the head of the club was actually the cranium of some unknown beast. The skull was extremely uneven with many bulges and bumps and looked quite gnarly.

Its make was actually a bit reminiscent of his own weapon, **[Verun's Bite]**, as it carried the same type of primal aura. Zac instinctively felt it might be a Spirit Tool just like his own. All in all, the man gave out a dense aura of power, and Zac knew this man was far stronger than the rabble he'd just clobbered. His size and muscle clearly weren't just for show, and he gave off a quite imposing feeling.

The Zhix by his side obviously had a similar impression of the giant.

“Greetings, Your Holiness,” Ibtep immediately said as they walked up to the large human and gave a deep bow. “I am Ibtep, ambassador of Nonet, Anointed of the hive of Kundevi. Strength to your hive.”

The huge man blankly stared at the Zhix for a few seconds, and even Zac blanked out for a bit before he understood what was going on.

“Uh, Ibtep, the humans don’t have any Anointed. He is just very large.”

“Impossible, with this frame, he must be anointed by the God of War,” the Zhix staunchly rebutted.

To Zac’s surprise, a well-dressed middle-aged man next to the giant stepped forward and gave a proper bow in response.

“Greetings, Ibtep of Hive Kundevi. This is Mayor Thwonkin’ Billy of Billyville. We are pleased to make your acquaintance,” he said with a proper British accent.

Zac’s eyebrows rose when he heard the introduction, and he shot another glance at the giant. Thwonkin’ Billy had been on the top ten of the Ladder since day one, and he currently held the seventh spot with level 38. Zac had to admit that the true appearance of the Ranker even trumped what he’d imagined the first time he read the pseudonym.

“Hello, I’m Monk,” Zac said to the giant.

“What’s an Anointed?” the huge man said, looking extremely confused.

“The Zhix are theocratic; their leaders are called the Anointed,” Zac explained, but the giant once again stared blankly at the two.

“They are the insect big bosses,” the man next to Billy explained to his companion without missing a beat.

“Ha ha, you are stupid, insect man. I am a leader of humans, not insects,” the giant guffawed. “Hey, you look smart and good at thwonking. Do you want to come and beat ratmen? They give a lot of money and make you stronger. We’re looking for people to help with the ratlight.”



“I’m sorry, what’s a ratlight?” Zac asked, confused.

“An incursion. Billy is the leader of our town, which is situated next to an incursion infested by Ratmen. We keep killing them, but they seem to propagate at extreme speeds, making it hard to make any headway in closing it. We’re here looking for allies,” the butler-esque man next to Billy explained.

Billy clearly wasn’t lying about killing Ratmen giving a lot of benefits, since he obviously received huge gains from the incursion. He wasn’t only on the top ten of the power list, but also on the wealth list. Zac didn’t think it would be too hard to get some eager volunteers as soon as they announced Billy’s name.

“Billy has been thwonkin’ rats for months. I’m tired. I wanna do something else, but they keep coming.” The giant sighed.

“Oh, unfortunately, we are a bit preoccupied for the moment with some problems with our own town, but we’ll help out if we can,” Sap Trang answered after seeing a small shake from Zac.

“Give them the time, Nigel,” the giant said to his companion as he stuffed the last canapés into his mouth.

“That’s... a bit early, Billy.” The man hesitated.

“Give them the time, Nigel,” the giant simply repeated.

“Sigh... Seventeen days from now. At ten a.m. in New Washington time. We will make the Billyville teleportation array public for fifteen minutes. We hope to make some allies here who will join us in fighting the Ratmen Incursion at that time,” Nigel said.

“Oh?” Zac said, intrigued.

It was a novel idea to set predestined times to make teleporters public. Of course, it was a bit impractical, but there were not many other options before people started to become Lords and gain access to more sophisticated methods to control their domains and teleporters.

“We’ll try to make it. If not us, then perhaps others from Port Atwood. We have many people there who like, uh, thwonking,” Zac said to Billy.

“Good!” Billy loudly exclaimed as he turned to leave. “I’m hungry. These people are stupid. Why make food so small? See you in two weeks!”

“If you are serious, whom do I speak with regarding details?” Nigel said as he stayed on after throwing the huge man an exasperated glance.

“I represent the humans on Port Atwood, but I can’t speak for what the demons will do,” Sap Trang answered.

“I see an old friend. I’ll go talk to him while you figure things out. Ibtap, please stay with Mr. Trang for now. Your kind has made a lot of enemies in the past months, and if we want to make a pact against the Dominators, we can’t create trouble at this stage.”

“I understand, human. I will stay here,” Ibtap said as they looked down on the incapacitated people. “Should we take these ones’ possessions while we wait? They are spoils of battle.”

“Leave them. Let the government figure it out,” Zac said as he looked toward the soldiers.

As if summoned by his words, a few of the soldiers rushed forward and carried the unconscious men away. Zac waited a bit longer to see if anyone from the government would want to come over to talk, but it looked like they considered the matter over, as he was left alone.

Satisfied, he put away his club and moved toward the Ishiate. All together, there were about forty of the beastmen, spread quite evenly between the two camps, and none barred his path as he moved forward. He wasn’t very surprised after his display of power, and soon he was in front of Selas, who stood next to an old man.

“Long time no see, Selas,” Zac said with a slight smile.

He wasn’t angry at the Ishiate for closing the teleporter a few weeks ago. Keeping it open would have put the whole

village in constant danger, as anyone could just enter as they wished. Still, the beastman looked a bit awkward as he slightly bowed with an embarrassed smile.

“Hello, Zac, it is good to see you again. I am sorry about the discourtesy the other time. Keeping the array open would have been a risk to the villagers,” the Ishiate said.

“No problem, I understand. We all keep our teleporters private for a reason.”

“You two know each other?” an elderly and kind-looking Ishiate asked with some interest.

“Yes, Mr. Zac here passed through our village and helped us kill an extremely strong beast that was threatening the villagers,” Selas explained.

“Oh, such a thing happened? You’re a friend of the Ishiate, then. I am Willow, Druid of the Mountain,” the old man said with a bow.

“Nice to meet you. I didn’t expect Ishiate to be here, to be honest,” Zac said as he looked at the pretty large group.

The comment about being a Druid was something he’d ask around about later, as it might be considered rude to do it right away.

“We are mainly here for information. You humans have proven to be far more adept than us at exploring our new world. There are many of us who are searching for their ancestral homes and families, and New Washington is our best bet to find news,” Willow explained.

Zac nodded, as it made sense. The Ishiate were not very technologically advanced. Even those of the other group looked more like steampunk cosplayers than high-tech people. Both groups would clearly benefit from the programs that the government provided. Perhaps in the future, there would be arrays or evolved scouts who could provide information even more efficiently, but Earth was far from that point.

“What about you?”

“We’re mainly here for the excitement. And who knows, we might pick up something nice as well,” Zac answered with a smile.

“Your group is quite interesting. There has already been some speculation about companions amongst the groups in this room,” another elderly man dressed very much as Willow said. “You’re only missing Ishiate in your party.”

“Our village is extremely remote. We had to team up with whoever is available. As for the blue gnome, he’s from a store we purchased through the Town Shop,” Zac answered with a smile. “And we actually found two Ishiate settlements just the other day but still haven’t made contact. Perhaps next time, our party will be even more diverse.”

The comment caused some interest amongst most of the beastmen, who curiously looked over at him.

“Do you have any information about those who live there?” an Ishiate hurriedly asked, and Zac realized that many were hoping it was one of their home villages, even if it was a long shot.

He took out a full report detailing the expedition from his pouch. He had all types of reports typed up, but honestly, he almost never read them. But sometimes it was quite convenient, such as now.

“The two towns both hold an estimated one thousand to two thousand citizens. They seem to be from the group of your friends over there, though,” he said and pointed to the other group of Ishiate, who stood some distance away. “They had erected proper walls and seemed to be in decent shape, not in need of saving at the moment.”

Many of the beastkin sighed in disappointment, but a few still held on to hope.

“We know that sometimes our groups have joined hands to survive. Perhaps some of our people are there as well. Were there any markers on the towns?”

“Uh, yeah, there were some kind of flags on both walls. One held a picture of a sun with a branch underneath; the other

was a cogwheel with a lightning bolt running through it on a white background,” Zac answered as he read through the report.

The Ishiate looked at each other, and after a few moments, shook their heads in disappointment. However, two beastkin from the other group quickly walked over. Even though they belonged to different camps, the Ishiate stood a bit clumped together, and the Ishiate probably overheard the conversation with their keen hearing.

“Is what you said just now true?” one of them asked, and they had hope in their eyes.



## THE AUCTION BEGINS

The Ishiate who followed the way of nature frowned as they saw the two steampunk beastkin approach, but one of the elders spoke up.

“We can’t focus on old conflicts anymore. If our kin is to survive, we must work together,” he said, but couldn’t help himself from continuing. “The universe has shown us the right path, and I’m sure the lost ones will return into the fold soon enough.”

Zac sort of understood what the old druid meant. The two camps of the Ishiate essentially fought over the issue of nature versus technology, and it was pretty clear which of the two camps the System sided with. He actually felt a bit bad for the technologically inclined Ishiate, as their situation wasn’t very optimistic.

Of course, it was possible to become a powerful force in this new environment with the aid of technology. The Technocrats was one of the strongest forces in the Multiverse and still lived well, even though multiple forces were gunning for them. However, the Technocrats were approaching the limits of technology, having the means to travel the universe and unleashing terrifying weapons.

These Ishiate were no Technocrats and had barely started on the path of technology. Their progress was a few hundred years behind humanity, and their weapons were probably already approaching obsolescence against the increasingly durable beasts in the wild. Zac guessed they would perish unless they turned back to the simpler ways.

“Progress is the basic path of life. To stick to the old ways is to perish. That hasn’t changed with the System; it has only been reinforced,” one of the two Ishiate retorted with a glare.

“Human, is what you said true? There is truly a town with those flags close to your town?” the other Ishiate asked.

“Yeah, our scouts found them a few days ago,” Zac simply answered.

It wasn’t really any secret information, and he could very much sympathize with these people. He understood what it was like to desperately search for his home in an endlessly large new world.

“Please let us come with you when you leave. That is Cogstown, our hometown,” they asked with hope in their eyes.

Zac mulled it over for a bit. He felt it wasn’t too problematic to bring a few people with him through the teleporter. Besides, bringing these two should make forming an alliance considerably easier when they made first contact.

“Our town is extremely remote. In fact, it’s not on the mainland. It’s not certain that you can get back without using our teleporter. Do you still wish to go?” he said.

“Yes,” both of them answered without hesitation, and Zac only nodded.

“Talk with my companion over there, the human. He can make the arrangements,” Zac said as he pointed to Sap Trang, who was still speaking with Nigel.

Suddenly, a couple of speakers crackled into life, playing the classical intermission sound.

“Seems the auction is starting. If you will excuse me, I need to gather up my group,” Zac said as he moved away.

“It was nice meeting you, Zac,” Willow said with a smile. “We hope to see you again.”

Soon he was back with the others. By this point, Calrin had already returned, and soon he saw Ogras saunter over as well, holding a bottle of champagne he’d snagged from somewhere.



“Not many interesting things happening so far. Everyone is just sticking to their little groups, barely talking. The liquor isn’t bad, though. We should bring some bottles with us back home.”

“Not sure how many there are left. I think a lot of people have turned to the bottle to calm their nerves over the past few months,” Zac said with a sigh. “But it doesn’t hurt to give it a try.”

Actually, he agreed with the demon. While he didn’t really like champagne, he really wanted to bring some beer with him back to the island, but he felt that most of it would have been consumed after almost five months since the integration.

“Then we simply get some brewers,” the demons said offhandedly, but the sentence sparked an idea in Zac, and he turned to Sap Trang.

“Start thinking of a list of any type of occupation we’re currently lacking. Everything from chefs to sanitation workers to scientists.”

He hadn’t really planned to start recruiting in earnest yet, but since he had already brought hundreds of refugees to Port Atwood, he might as well go all the way. Who knew if all the useful people would be snatched up if they kept holding off. It might be a bit unethical to start moving more people to the island even before the third wave was dealt with, but if worse came to worst, he could just have people flee through the teleporter back to New Washington.

The number of people in the venue was a clear indication that quite a few forces possessed a teleporter by this point. Zac knew that it wasn’t that people were extremely wealthy like him; rather, his force was quite small compared to many towns. Taking New Washington for example; it held hundreds of thousands of citizens, and every person just had to contribute a handful of Nexus Coins for them to afford the teleporter.

He needed to start thinking ahead if he was truly planning on creating a flourishing town. There might still be a window of opportunity where the other forces mainly looked for

powerful warriors or Rankers to join them, overlooking the long-term benefits that noncombat classes could bring to an area.

Port Atwood on his island was quite a lot safer compared to most places on the mainland, which should allow him to focus more on recruiting and nurturing many people showing skill in craftsmanship. He already had an almost insane amount of raw materials for creating armor; now he just needed craftsmen to actually craft and inscribe them.

“Good, now you’re thinking of the big picture.” Ogras nodded. “I’m tired of living like a castaway.”

The group walked together and was ushered to a couple of seats near the front by an attendant who took a quick look at the ticket. It was obvious that Zac’s rampage in Greenworth had left somewhat of an impression on the government, as they clearly sat in some of the best seats in the house.

This was further confirmed when both the Marshalls and Billy were seated not far from them.

“Nigel told me the strong sit in the front. I knew you were smart, bald guy. But Billy is not only smart, Billy is also rich,” the giant said with a loud voice as he thumped down close to them, taking up two seats by himself.

“I’m sure there are enough good things for both of us,” Zac answered with a smile.

He liked the giant so far; he seemed genuine enough. He’d take that kind of ally any day over calculating ones like the demon next to him.

The Marshalls seemed a bit surprised to see Zac’s group once again, and Zac saw the guardian whisper something in the ear of their attendant. He glanced at Zac’s group but only shook his head, looking unsure.

“Hey, girl, I hear you’re the strongest woman amongst the humans. We saw your jump in the Dao Ladder a while back. Did you find something good? Are you interested in selling it?” Ogras said with a toothy grin as he looked in Thea Marshall’s direction.

“I am sorry about him. Different cultures and all,” Zac said while flashing a smile he hoped would look disarming rather than mocking.

“Weaklings often have big mouths to compensate. I’m more curious about you. What are you called?” she lightly said as she stared at Zac.

“Uh, people call me Monk,” Zac said, uncomfortable from the intense glare.

“She’s got a mouth on her,” Ogras said, not minding the insult. “You should kidnap her back to Port Atwood. You’d have strong babies.”

The bodyguard frowned at the comment and prepared to move forward, but Thea lifted her hand to stop him. At the same time, a spurt of blood erupted from Ogras’ throat, surprising both Zac and the demon.

Even though Zac was looking at the exchange from the start, he wasn’t quite sure what exactly cut him. At first, he thought it might have been a Dao field of the Seed of Sharpness, but he believed he would have sensed the familiar feeling if that was the case.

“Watch your mouth,” Thea said as she looked at the demon with loathing.

Shadows squirmed and covered the shallow wound, and soon the bleeding was quelled.

“An interesting attack. But be careful about starting things. You may be strong, but can the same be said of your companions?” The demon smiled, and Zac’s eyebrows rose in alarm.

But before Zac had time to stop anything, the bodyguard grunted as a shadow spear pushed through one of his legs, almost making him fall over. Thea looked around in surprise, and a frown appeared on the old man.

“What do you think? Can you kill me before I kill your two companions?” Ogras said while grinning.

“Despicable,” the girl said, throwing scathing glares at not only Ogras but the whole party.

“Enough,” Zac said while glaring angrily at Ogras, already regretting bringing him. “What will you do if you get us thrown out before the auction even starts?”

“Relax, we’re just having some pre-auction fun,” Ogras said with a smile.

“I am sorry about him. This is a healing pill that will help with your friend’s recovery,” Zac said to the Marshalls as he took out a small glass bottle and threw it toward them.

However, the bottle got rebuffed in the air and shot straight back toward Zac through some unknown means.

“The Marshall Clan is in no need of your little baubles,” Thea simply said as the trio sat down in their seat some distance away.

“Mama always says you should be nice to women, as being mean will bring you big trouble,” Billy muttered to himself, but with the giant’s standard volume, it turned into an exclamation.

“She sounds like a wise woman,” Ogras only said to the giant, making him perk up happily.

He looked ready to say something but was distracted by the large curtains getting lifted on the stage, and some musicians played classical music. It was beautiful, but it wasn’t what Zac came for, so he was happy to see that almost immediately a well-dressed man in a suit walked out on the stage and stood behind the podium.

“Welcome all to the first Grand Auction held by the New World Government. It is an amazing sight to see so many coming from all corners of the world. It is truly a testament to humanity’s resilience in the face of adversity. We’re also happy to see friends from other races joining us here today. I am hoping this is the start of a long and fruitful cooperation between our species.”

The man was clearly used to public speaking and smoothly took command of the room.

“To make sure there’s no confusion in the event, I will go over the ground rules. This auction is a classical English-style auction, and for those who are unsure of what that means, don’t worry, I will go over it with you. Beneath your chairs, there are numbered paddles that you use to bid. Simply raise the paddle to make a bid.

“The standard bid increase is based on the size, but generally around ten percent. For example, if the price is ten thousand Nexus Coins, each standard bid will be a thousand Nexus Coins up to fifty thousand, at which point the standard bid changes to five thousand.

“Of course, you can increase the bid by a higher amount by shouting it out, but not by a lower amount,” the auctioneer said with a smile.

“If you are the highest bidder, your number will be seen on the screen behind me. And don’t worry if you’re sitting in the back. I have three people all with scout classes and eyesight skills with me who will all help me in making sure that no bid is overlooked.

“Payment accepted is World Government credits, Nexus Coins or Nexus Crystals valued at a one-to-fifty ratio. Be aware that no coercion, threats, or other disturbances are allowed during the auction. A first offense will result in a warning, but repeat offenders will be escorted out of the venue.

“With that, I hope you will enjoy the auction and that you all find something that will help you in the fight against our foreign invaders. The first item for auction is a set of five E-grade Nexus Crystals,” the auctioneer said as a cart was rolled in by a beautiful woman.

On the cart was a briefcase, and when the showgirl opened it, the light of five genuine E-grade crystals radiated out. There was almost a collective intake of breath in the hall, and even Zac was interested.

The New World Government was clearly not holding back.



## E M M A

“I am sure you’re all aware of the efficacy of an E-grade Nexus Crystal by now. They are still not available for sale in the stores, and only a scant few have been found or rewarded from quests. Just one contains enough power to gain a whole level for most people. They can also power your defensive structures or arrays when defending your towns, making them a must-have for aspiring Lords.

“The five crystals will be sold as a set, and the price starts at 25,000 Nexus Coins,” the auctioneer shouted, trying to hype up the wares.

That put the crystals at roughly 5,000 Nexus Coins per crystal, which was the general market price, as one E-grade crystal was worth roughly a hundred F-grade ones in the Multiverse. However, their value was far higher on Earth at the moment.

There was a desperate demand, but almost no supply. Zac knew that on a D-grade world like theirs, E-grade crystals wouldn’t be anything special in a couple of years when the world had acclimatized and the crystals had been given time to grow. But for now, they were extremely rare, as the shops didn’t sell them.

Still, they would give a huge leveling boost for most people, and Zac expected their price to go far higher compared to what they were actually worth. He was quickly proven right as the price increased to over a hundred thousand in no time, people desperately shouting higher and higher prices.

“One hundred ten thousand, thank you, B183,” the auctioneer said, but barely had time to finish the sentence before the price increased again on the large monitor behind him.

“Two hundred thousand,” the elder of the Marshall Clan suddenly said, and the hall quickly stilled.

The crystals would no doubt be a big help to most, but they would at the best give two, perhaps three levels over a few days. Spending that much for saving two weeks of time, even less if the crystals were shared over multiple people, was a bit much for most people.

“Two hundred fifty thousand,” Ogras said with a grin while waving the paddle at the old man.

“That’s coming out of your own pocket,” Zac only said.

“You have a thing or two to learn about auctions. You need to let people know you’re a force to be reckoned with. That you have more money than sense. That will discourage people from bidding against you, helping you save money. No one likes to lose a bidding war, after all,” Ogras said with a low volume, clearly enjoying himself.

“Three hundred thousand,” the old man responded with a snort.

“The second thing to remember is to push up the prices for things you don’t need, especially if your biggest competitors are bidding,” he continued, and for once, Calrin seemed to wholeheartedly agree.

“An auction is not only a battle of wallets; it’s also about wits,” the gnome said.

“People are stupid. Just thwunk rats for a week and you get as much energy, and you gain money, not lose it,” Billy muttered, and Zac had to agree as he threw a glance at the old man.

He knew that Thea Marshall had once been on the top ten of the Wealth Ladder, and there actually were two more of the Marshall Clan on the Wealth Ladder since some time ago. Still, three hundred thousand Nexus Coins was by no means a



small amount of money, especially for just a few Nexus Crystals.

Certainly, he'd gained almost two levels from absorbing his own E-grade crystals, but those levels had very little impact on his power in general. Besides, he knew that it wasn't a good idea to rely on crystals too much.

One of the requirements of advancing one's class was achievements, and if you just sat at home continuously absorbing crystals, you likely wouldn't be able to upgrade to E-grade, forcing you to risk your life in various Mystic Realms or the like.

Ogras didn't bid any further and smilingly watched two guards bring the case to the old man, who just put it in a Cosmos Sack without looking further at the contents.

The auction continued, and to Zac's disappointment, it quickly became clear that the crystals were an opening salvo to increase the excitement, as the following items were nowhere as good. Still, it gave Zac a very good insight into what people lacked and what was in surplus.

Weapons and gear were among the most common items to be put up in the auction, many of which were even worse than the standard regiment items the demons brought.

Zac learned some time ago that those weapons were things that the apprentices made, and most of the real soldiers of Clan Azh'Rezak bought their own, far superior, weapons as soon as they could. The reason so few brought strong weapons through the incursion, apart from Ogras and a few others, was that it cost money to do so.

To Zac's surprise, these items had no problem getting sold, and many of the weapons even created heated bidding wars. Of course, none of the true powerhouses bid on these types of items, but they clearly held value to even warriors who were powerful enough to attend this kind of event. This made Zac redouble his desire to find capable craftsmen who could help his demon craftsmen quickly churn out a huge number of items.

Various resources such as metals, woods, and herbs weren't as popular, showing that the craftsman classes on Earth were still in their infancy. Herbs were usually quite popular in the Multiverse, and skilled alchemists were amongst the wealthiest people around.

Calrin managed to snatch up one item after another, meeting little resistance in his bidding spree. However, he didn't look overly excited, which told Zac that the materials weren't too good.

Ogras also bid a bit, mostly to piss others off, it seemed. However, he still bought a few things, mainly liquors from old Earth. They actually didn't go cheap, and Zac was surprised to see the demand for fine spirits.

Perhaps Ogras was truly onto something when he'd spoken about finding brewers. He had a lot of land, after all, and with the temperate climate and highly concentrated Cosmic Energy, he'd have no problems growing either hops or grapes.

The process kept going for almost two hours, and Zac was starting to get bored. However, the auctioneer stopped bringing out new items after selling off a beautiful bow to a woman in a back row.

"This concludes the first half of our auction. I am happy that so many of you have found something of interest. We will take a short break for thirty minutes, and refreshments will be served. The second half contains far fewer items, but I am sure that each and every one of them will astound you," he said with a smile.

With that, the doors at the back of the venue once again opened.

"What paupers, nothing exciting for sale," the demon spat.

"You still bought some things," Zac said.

"Just minor purchases to pass the time. Hopefully, the second round will be more exciting," he said, and the Sky Gnome nodded, though he clearly didn't hold much hope.

Zac smiled and shook his head as they walked out.

“Is this type of activity common amongst humans?” the Zhix asked as they exited the hall.

“Well, rich people did it a lot, I suppose,” Zac said with some hesitation.

To be honest, it was the first auction he’d personally attended as far as he could remember.

“Excuse me, I need to look around a bit,” Zac said as he headed for a group at random.

For the next thirty minutes, he went around the human groups, trying to find anyone who was close to the undead incursion. Of course, he wasn’t completely obvious and instead brought up the topic of incursions and asked whether any of them was close to their home. He tried to make it look like he was looking for good spots to fight and gain levels.

If New Washington was a bit to the west of the central area of the new continent, then the incursion was rather to the southeast. From the information he got from Julia, the cultivators from Greenworth should be somewhere on the eastern side of the incursion, so that was where he needed to go next to look for his sister.

However, the results weren’t too promising, as no one was even close to where he wanted to go. Almost the whole intermission was spent going from party to party, forcefully inserting himself in the conversations to ask about their origins. Zac was starting to despair, as the time for the break was almost running out.

But finally, as he accosted a stocky man with a great sword on his back, he actually hit the jackpot.

“Yes, we are quite close to the undead bastards. They really are a pain in the ass. Luckily, there are a few frontier towns between us and the fallen areas, where quite a few cultivators reside, making our town quite a bit safer,” the robust man said with a sigh.

“Really? Which side of the incursion?” Zac asked, trying to hide his excitement.

“The north side,” the man answered. “It’s lucky too. From what we’ve gathered, the worst of their kind generally keep to the central area, but when they venture out, they mostly head south or east. Huge Chinese and Indian cities in those directions provide their leaders with many soldiers.”

“I would like to make use of your teleporter in the future if possible. The undead hordes seem like an ideal spot to get stronger. I can pay quite generously for passage,” Zac said, trying to seem interested, but not overly so.

“Ah... That’s... a bit complicated. I can’t really promise anything,” the man said.

“Complicated how? If there is someone else making those decisions, I can talk with them as well,” Zac said, burning with eagerness on the inside.

The man was just about to say something, but the speakers sounded, marking the end of the intermission.

“Well, you will find out soon. Just stay behind after the auction. The government will make everything clear then,” the man said with a low voice.

Zac was confused but knew there was no point in trying to convince the man. He already knew the man’s face, so he would wait until after the auction to see what was going on. From the way he spoke, it was connected to whatever the government was planning, the real reason they’d called this gathering.

Soon he found himself back in his seat. However, he wasn’t in any real mood to focus on the auction. He’d finally found a way to get to Kenzie. Even if the man’s town was on the north side, Zac felt it wouldn’t be a problem to push straight through the incursion to the eastern side. If he pushed himself to his limit, it shouldn’t take too long to traverse, even if it had grown quite huge. A week maybe, two at the most.

He was so consumed by his planning, he didn’t really react to the curtains once again opening, and a person walking out on the stage. However, the exaggerated reaction of the demon

next to him dragged him out of his musings. Ogras almost stood up in his seat, gaping at the scene.

Zac quickly looked at the stage and saw that the man from earlier had been replaced, and Zac actually knew this person. It was Emma MacHale, the movie star. She had starred in quite a few movies recently and had been one of the hottest names before the integration happened. She was also one of Ogras' favorites after having binged on an unhealthy number of movies.

Zac suddenly had a foreboding feeling as he looked over to see shadows gathering around the demon.



## MYSTERY STONES

Zac's hand gripped Ogras' shoulder, firmly embedding the demon in his chair. During the past months, Zac had learned that the shadow skills of the demon were not invincible, and there were ways to counteract them.

For example, if he got hold of the demon and pushed out some Cosmic Energy through his hands, the demon wouldn't be able to turn into shadows and disappear. It was very convenient at a time like this when he clearly was up to no good.

"Are you insane?" Zac wheezed out. "You will get yourself killed and me kicked out. For what? To meet an actress?"

"You're too hesitant all the time. Going around calling yourself Monk. Not wanting to make a scene. Being low-key. You're a powerhouse; act like it. That's Emma from all the movies. This might be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to court her. You shouldn't be stopping me; you should be fighting me for who gets to take her back," Ogras wheezed back, unfortunately loudly enough for the last sentence to be heard by a few of the closest people.

Zac cringed under the glares, but at least the demon seemed to have listened to him, as he stopped trying to teleport up on the stage. In fact, he was wondering if the demon was correct. Not about the starlet, but about his demeanor. Both Billy and Thea were walking tall and proud, not hiding who they were. But he, the number one powerhouse of humanity, was still hiding.

Displaying who he was might actually help him out in various ways. People would bend over backwards just to be able to make some connections with him and provide various types of support in the hope of becoming friends, or at least allies. Scrubs like the men earlier wouldn't trouble him either, even if Ibtep started flipping them off.

However, Kenzie still held him back. He would stay incognito as long as he could. Honestly, after his actions in Greenworth, the government should already have some pretty strong suspicions about his identity unless their information-gathering capabilities had turned to shit. But hopefully, they hadn't found his real identity yet, which in a sense was even more important for him.

“Whatever. There seems to be an important meeting after the auction. You can go flirt with her then,” Zac said.

A sweet voice echoing through the speakers cut their conversation short, and both turned their gazes back to the gorgeous woman on the stage.

“Welcome, all, to the second half of the New World Government Auction. I am Emma MacHale, your new host,” she said and threw out a radiant smile.

The area erupted in cheers and whistles, and Zac looked on with bemusement when the demon joined in. Ogras had almost become addicted to the movies over the past months, and Zac wondered if he even remembered his promise about turning the movies into sellable items.

“As my colleague said earlier, there will be fewer items in this second half, but each and every one is a true treasure. At least we think so, since, honestly, we do not know exactly what some of the things for sale are!” the hostess said with a laugh.

“Also, Thomas Fischer, the mayor of New Washington, will say a few words afterward, so please stay behind. It will definitely be information you don't want to miss!”

It didn't take long until the first item was rolled out, and to Zac's surprise, he actually recognized it when a picture was



shown on the large monitor. It was one of the entrance tickets to the Treasure Hunt that would take place in roughly two months.

Zac wasn't surprised, however, to see a token come up for sale here. He wasn't sure how many had been awarded during the Tutorial, but they shouldn't be too rare if Selas had been able to snag two of them. There surely were many who didn't want to risk entering such a place, competing against both the environment and all the powerhouses, and instead chose to sell it for a profit.

“You should all recognize this, the prize for the elites of the Tutorial, an entrance ticket to the Treasure Hunt happening soon! Not much is known about it apart from the fact that there will be chances to gain both titles and rare treasures. Having a few extra friends to go with you might make all the difference. The starting price is 250,000 Nexus Coins or equivalent!”

It was a hefty sum, but it was clearly worth it for the forces who were planning on heading in.

“Two hundred fifty,” the guard next to the Marshalls said.

“Three hundred fifty!” The thundering exclamation came from Billy.

“Five hundred thousand,” Ogras shouted as well, surprising Zac.

“Can you even use it?” Zac asked Ogras in a low voice, surprising him.

“Why shouldn't I?” he asked back.

Zac only fished out his own token from his bag and handed it over.

“See if you can use it before you spend all your money,” he said.

The demon snatched the token up and fiddled with it a bit, a frown quickly forming on his face.

“Is this a fake?” he warily asked.

“Why would I have a fake? I got it on one of my excursions. I knew that only natives could go,” Zac answered with a roll of his eyes.

“Bah, Ruthless Heavens indeed,” the demon muttered angrily as he threw the token back to Zac. “There should be some Mystic Realms opening soon in any case. Who cares about your stupid Treasure Hunt.”

Mystic Realms were something that could be found all across the Multiverse. There were quite a few types of them, with everything from tombs of powerful warriors leaving an inheritance to mysterious zones created by aberrant energies.

The most common type, though, was spatial pocket realms that simply had been detached from a main dimension for some reason or another. Some of these realms were desolate wastelands, but others were pristine areas filled with various rare and precious materials.

It was quite a common thing for adventurers to make their living exploring Mystic Realms, hoping to either strike it rich or rack up enough experiences to help with breaking through their bottlenecks.

The Mystic Realms were usually accessed through finding soft spots, where the membrane between the main dimension and the pocket realm was at the weakest. At these spots, one could place specific arrays whose job was to create stable portals through the dimensional barrier.

Finding a good Mystic Realm and claiming it could become a huge steady stream of income to a clan or force. Some could be turned into training fields for armies, as long as there was a prolific species living inside. Others were even larger than planets, making it worthwhile for adventurers to keep heading through, as many treasures might still lie in wait.

The most sought-after ones were those holding ruins from old civilizations. Some of them might originate from highly ranked original worlds, such as C-grade continents. There needed to be quite a bit of energy involved for a whole section of a dimension to be ripped out and thrown into the folds between universes, after all.

Usually, the energy had partly dissipated in the Mystic Realm, making the Cosmic Energy scarcer compared to that of the main continent, but if there was a fallen civilization in the pocket realm, the chance of finding valuable treasures was far greater compared to running around in the forests on a D-grade world.

It didn't take long until Billy snagged the tag for a whopping one million Nexus Coins. Actually, any time Billy started bidding on something, there was simply no stopping him. He truly treated money like water, not caring in the slightest what the prices became. His confidant had tried to rein in his spending, but the giant had only laughed and called him stupid.

Following the first token, they actually sold another four of them, and they all sold in the same range. The Marshall Clan was showing off its muscles, actually buying two of them. One went to an old man among the Ishiate, with the final one being sold to a hooded person in the back.

“Next up, we have a unique material an explorer found deep in a cave. It is not a metal that was previously found on Earth, and it doesn't conform to the laws of physics,” Emma said as a larger reinforced tray was rolled out.

“It is only as large as a fist, but it weighs over two hundred kilos. More amazingly, its weight drastically changes depending on its temperature, and inside a fire, it actually floats,” she said. “Perhaps a skilled craftsman can make something amazing out of this thing in the future.”

Zac thought it was an interesting item, but he was unsure how he personally would go about using it. Perhaps someone who used either fire- or ice-based attacks could somehow take advantage of its unique properties and create some strong weapon.

“Ten thousand,” Zac suddenly heard from his left and saw Calrin holding up his paddle.

He was actually standing on the chair so as to be seen, slouching on the backrest. However, Zac had gotten to know the gnome a bit over the past months and saw that the

lackadaisical expression was mostly an illusion. He really wanted this stone.

“Fifty thousand,” a voice in the back shouted, starting off the bidding in earnest.

The item was interesting, but not many people were willing to go too far in the bidding. Most likely knew that it might be valuable somehow in the future, even if they didn’t know how to utilize it today. But money was limited this early into the integration, and few were willing to spend hundreds of thousands on an investment that might give a return in the distant future.

Luckily for Calrin, it seemed that Billy wasn’t interested in the stone, and he managed to secure it for 350,000 Nexus Coins. As soon as the tray came close, the gnome bounced down from his chair and immediately put the stone into his Cosmos Sack after paying, and he couldn’t stop a grin from appearing as he walked back to his chair.

“Congratulations, my friend. Next item is another mystery stone,” Emma said with a wink. “This one might look like a normal stone, but it is anything but. Apart from being extremely hard, it also emits a weird aura. It is hard to explain, so we will show you.”

A stone about as large as a soccer ball was rolled out on another tray, but this time, it was accompanied by a girl holding a vase with a normal flower in it. After the tray was placed at the usual spot for the items, they simply placed the vase down next to it.

Everyone looked at the stone and the flower, unsure what was going on, but soon their eyebrows rose as the flower wilted with a speed visible to the naked eye. Murmurs and exclamations erupted over the whole area, but Emma once again stepped forward.

“As you can see, the stone made the flower wilt. Actually, according to our scientists who have studied the stone, it actually absorbs the life force from the flower rather than emitting some deadly radiation. In fact, it emits no radiation at all, which any Geiger counter can testify to. And don’t worry,

it is not able to absorb human life force. At least not that we know.”

Zac barely listened to the explanation from the starlet, as he was preoccupied with something else. He was holding on to his Cosmos Sack with a frown on his face, unsure what was going on with **[Verun’s Bite]**.

Even from inside his Cosmos Sack, he could feel his axe throbbing with an almost palpable hunger.



## JOINT VENTURES

The only explanation Zac could find for the weird behavior of his axe was that the stone in front of him was something it desired. He'd known since long ago that it needed to absorb various materials to improve to E-grade.

However, the only thing he'd found so far that it actually wanted to absorb was blood. And not any blood either, since it was completely uninterested in both the humans and the ants he'd killed since acquiring it. The only thing it had actually drank was the supercharged mink in the forest.

He had tested various things that were lying around in Port Atwood but with no luck. Unfortunately, different Spirit Tools craved different materials, so there was no guide lying around. However, it seemed that at least some of the ingredients would need to be E-grade in order for it to upgrade, as that was the same with all tools.

Zac had the money and decided to purchase the stone. Who knew when another chance would crop up. He surreptitiously glanced over at the gnome, but he only slightly shook his head while looking unsure, indicating he didn't know what the stone was. That only increased Zac's desire, since that should mean it was something rare and valuable.

"One hundred thousand," a voice from the back said, once again starting a bidding war.

It was a bit more heated this time, as perhaps the prospect of creating a weapon that could suck the life force out of their enemies was quite intriguing.

“One million,” a voice suddenly came from the front, quickly silencing the bidding.

It was Thea Marshall, holding up her paddle with an indifferent face. Zac frowned as he glanced over. She had just upped the bid by a whole 700,000 Nexus Coins, and it felt like she wanted to close it out.

“One point one million,” Nigel said as he held the arm of Billy.

“One point five,” Thea said as she threw a glance over at Nigel.

“One point six,” Nigel followed up without hesitation.

Zac felt there currently were two possibilities. Either they both knew what the stone and its approximate value was, or they’d both received a clue in the same way that he did. That would mean both of them had a Spirit Tool. He felt that the first option was a bit unlikely, as there shouldn’t be anyone more knowledgeable about precious metals compared to Calrin on Earth as of yet.

Since both were high Rankers, the second possibility was by no means impossible. The Tutorial gave out all kinds of good things, and these two were clearly at the top of the Tutorial. It seemed not only possible, but almost likely that they had been given proper weapons. And if it wasn’t from the Tutorial, then perhaps from some sort of quest.

But if that was the case, he felt it was a bit odd that all three weapons wanted the stone, as the weapons’ appetites should vary more than that. Perhaps it was something else, some sort of treasure that all Tool Spirits wanted. When he came to that conclusion, he didn’t wait any longer and entered the fray.

“Two million,” he said as he held up his paddle.

“Two point five,” Thea answered after throwing a glare at him.

“Three million,” Zac unhesitatingly responded.



From there, the bids started to get smaller, and at four million, Billy dropped out with a disappointed sigh. However, Thea was adamant.

“Five million Nexus Coins,” she said, now keeping a constant baleful glare at Zac.

“Six million,” Zac answered with a helpless smile, uncomfortably scratching the back of his head.

He’d finally found something that was quite valuable, and he had a huge amount of wealth at the moment. He might only have 17 million in pure Nexus Coins, but he also had mountains of crystals. He wasn’t first on the Wealth Ladder for nothing, while Thea had dropped down to the seventeenth spot recently.

When Zac reached six million, she finally relented and sat back in her chair with an angry harrumph.

“Wow, six million Nexus Coins. Congratulations to the handsome Mr. Monk in the front row,” Emma said with a wink, seemingly unaffected by the tense atmosphere.

As the tray with the stone was rolled toward Zac, various murmurs erupted through the hall. Zac felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up after being stared at by hundreds of people, but it couldn’t be helped. Six million for a stone was beyond extravagant, and by far the largest bid so far in the auction.

“What the hell, why does she know you?” Ogras suddenly asked from next to him with a glare, obviously referring to the movie star.

“How should I know? She works for the government; they might have told her,” Zac said with a shrug.

He quickly put the stone into a different pouch than the one that held **[Verun’s Bite]**. Zac wasn’t sure if something odd would happen if he brought them together, and wanted to wait until he was back on the island.

The items kept coming out one by one, and quite a few were natural oddities. There were various roots and flowers, stones and metals. It seemed that the government had put

everything they found that was weird and without an apparent use in the second half of the auction, hoping to at least make some money.

The interest was quite weak, apart from a few groups who bid a surprising amount. There was one group of people who sat a few rows behind that bid on many of the various plants. Zac guessed that they had an alchemist in their ranks, or at least an apothecary or herbalist.

The modern Ishiate bid for many of the metals, perhaps wanting to use them in metallurgy experiments. But the absolute foremost force in the bidding was Calrin, who flexed his muscles.

“How are you actually paying for all this?” Zac finally had to ask after the gnome snatched his tenth item in the second half.

The gnome had been destitute when he arrived on the island, and he shouldn't have made enough profit from the demonic warriors to afford all these purchases, as the amount he'd spent was over 10 million by now.

“You are, of course. And the demon to a certain extent,” he said with a shrug.

“WHAT?” both Zac and Ogras screamed, drawing quite a few glares from the people in the room.

“You went in as external investors in the Thayer Consortium. When we spend money, you spend money. See it as a cash infusion into your business,” he said with a widening smile. “I'm on your planet as a mercantile business owner. I'm not allowed to spend my own money on business ventures, since us merchants are usually wealthy enough to destroy the economy of a baby planet. If you didn't enter as co-owners, I would never be able to get this quest.”

Zac was having a bad feeling and quickly brought up his status screen.

He immediately turned back to the gnome, ready to strangle the little bastard. Eight million Nexus Coins were missing apart from those he spent himself.

Ogras wasn't looking much better, even though he should've only lost two million or so.

“YOU LITTLE BASTARD!” he roared, completely ignoring the guns that were suddenly pointing at them from the balconies.

His roar completely stopped the auction, and Emma backed away a few steps, warily looking at Zac's party.

“You'd better cough up my money real quick, or I'll poke you full of holes, you greedy little shit,” he growled as the shadows beneath them were starting to shudder.

“You brutes, don't bring attention to us. Why do you think I'm buying all these things? To make money. My quest is to make a profit, not a loss, you imbeciles. Just smile and open your wallets, and we will all walk away happy men,” he said, not caring in the slightest about the frothing demon.

“You know Port Atwood's situation. You can't spend an endless amount of money,” Zac said with a glare, having no intention of stopping Ogras this time.

The gnome had gone crazy with greed and was using their money to satiate it.

“You still have all the things you prepared for the ants, right?” he protested, but still looked a bit deflated from having both Zac and Ogras stare down at him.

“Fine, fine. I'm sorry, okay? Write down a spending limit, and I'll stick to it!” he said as he handed over a paper.

Zac once again felt the veins on his forehead throb when he saw that the gnome had already written seven zeroes on the note, and Zac unhesitantly scribbled over the last one to Calrin's dismay. As they were arguing, a man in a suit walked up on the stage with a microphone.

“Gentlemen, please remember the rules of the auction. This is your first and only warning,” he said with a somber expression.

“Sorry, sorry. How about I take Miss Emma out for dinner to show my contrition?” the demon said as he smoothed his

hair and shot off a winning smile.

The hall immediately exploded with boos and demands to throw them out, but Emma only smiled in response.

“I don’t know, judging by the bidding, your little blue friend is the one to go to dinner with. He seems quite generous,” she said with a wink.

The comment made Calrin proudly stretch his back, and even Zac couldn’t stop himself from smacking the gnome in the back of his head.

“It’s easy to be generous with others’ money,” he muttered in a low volume. “Five million, that’s your limit. And I expect to make quite some profit from your escapades. Otherwise, I’ll hand you over to Ogras.”

With that, the auction continued and kept going unimpeded. Zac had somewhat large hopes that the final items would be something exciting, but was disappointed to see that they were high-grade gear. He had hoped that there would be some stat or Dao-improving fruits for sale, but Zac guessed that they wouldn’t go on sale, even if the government had them.

Of course, the others in the audience didn’t have the same reaction, as there were harsh bidding wars for the last items. None of the items were Spirit Tools, though, but Zac felt it wasn’t anything odd. Any truly good piece wouldn’t be put up for auction this early into the integration, and in general, he was actually surprised the government was willing to part ways with so many interesting items.

Perhaps it could be considered a display of power as well, the capability to sell so many treasures. In addition, they made quite a bit of money, and the total value of all the items in the auction should approach almost seventy or eighty million.

With that amount of Nexus Coins, they could do some quite large upgrades to New Washington, provided they had unlocked enough options in their Nexus Node.

“As for this final item of the evening, I present to you the [**Sword of Storms**], an E-grade sword fitting both wind and

water cultivators,” she said.

Sap Trang looked quite interested for a bit but soon shook his head.

“You want it?” Zac asked as he looked over.

“Thank you, but no. It is a fine weapon, but sword-fighting isn’t really the point of my class in the end,” he said.

The Marshall family didn’t seem interested either, and in the end, it went to a powerful-looking cultivator for the whopping price of 2,500,000 Nexus Coins.

“Thank you all for coming and bidding today! I hope to see you all again at our next event. With this, I give you Thomas Fischer,” Emma said as she quickly left the stage, followed by applause and hooting.

Thomas Fischer came up to the stage soon after and was followed by multiple officials who stood in a row behind him. Zac recognized Julia, but the rest were unknown to him.

“Welcome, all. I have already had the pleasure of meeting many of you, but for those who do not know me, I am Thomas Fischer, the leader of New Washington. I was once the Deputy Secretary of Defense for the American government, but today, I stand before you as a representative for the New World Government.

“The arrival of the System and the incursions have resulted in extreme upheaval to our society, and I am sad to say that there are only approximately 1.5 billion humans left on Earth,” Thomas began.

“Six billion. Over six billion dead in just above five months. Every day, our brothers and sisters fall due to either the harsh environment we have been thrown into, or the invaders who aim to take our land for their own,” he continued, somberly looking over the subdued audience.

“It is time for humanity to unite.”



## CLEARING THE AIR

The beginning of Thomas Fischer's speech created a subdued silence in the whole venue. Even Zac was a bit shocked at the numbers. He knew that the undead incursion had done a number on both India and China, the two most populous countries before the fall, but that wasn't enough to explain that number of casualties.

Six billion lives lost, which meant that only 20% were still alive after less than half a year. And Zac knew that the world wasn't done with its transformation. There were still barely any E-graded monsters roaming about, which would change sooner or later.

The new planet was graded Low D-grade in both mass and energy by the System, meaning that it would be able to sustain D-grade powerhouses and beasts. There was one small solace in the fact that the animals were getting stronger, though. As monsters evolved, they became smarter and created their own societies in a sense.

They wouldn't go randomly attacking settlements, especially not if they knew it was guarded by arrays or powerhouses. Of course, that was predicated on there actually being those kinds of defenses; otherwise, the town would be fair game.

"We will take a short break in just a minute. After we reconvene, we will go through all the information we have gathered about the incursions and the foreign invaders. There will be much exclusive intelligence there, and I urge everyone to stay behind and listen. It will not only help with your

survival in the future, but it might also help with your path to power. For this part, everyone here will be welcome to participate, as we're all together in the fight against the incursions," Thomas continued.

"After that, we will focus on the organization of humanity. This part will have little information of value for our Ishiate friends, so we have prepared a separate venue for you at that point. Waiting for you there are representatives of the New World Government's information branch, who will do their best in helping you locate your brethren across the world.

"I hope to see you all again in a bit. Thank you for your attention."

As he finished, the lights once again brightened, and people began to stream out. However, just as Zac and the others made to leave as well, an official ran up to their group.

"Excuse me. Mr. Fischer would like to have a word with your group if you're available," he quickly said.

Zac just shrugged and followed the man, the others in his group following in tow. They were led to an area backstage, where Thomas and a few other officials waited.

"Mr. Monk, it is good to see you again. I want to thank you once again for the information you provided us the last time. It will be a huge asset to the coming war efforts of humanity," he said with a smile. "These people with me here are representatives of other major hubs of the New World Government."

"Johana Yakovna," a somber lady in her fifties said. "Former Russia and Eastern Europe."

"Francis Girardot, France," a man in his sixties said with a slight frown.

"Asano Kobo, Japan. Pleased to meet you," an Asian man said.

Soon all of them had presented themselves, and even Zac felt a bit intimidated to stand in front of so many of the world's leaders.



“What’s on your mind?” Zac asked.

“We know about the Zhix, but the identity of the two others is cause for concern,” the Russian delegate said, not mincing her words.

“How so?” Zac asked, having a sinking feeling.

“You should know as well as us that there have been no sightings anywhere else of these species,” another delegate continued. “Their origins are suspect. There is belief that they might be alien infiltrators.”

“Oh? Wouldn’t that make this a prime opportunity for us to kill you all and create some chaos?” Ogras answered with a grin, making a few of the delegates flinch.

“Ogras is just joking,” Zac quickly said and added with a glare at the demon, “but he’s not very funny.”

“I am Calrin Thayer of the Thayer Consortium,” the gnome quickly said as he stepped forward. “Your eyes are astute, as expected of the people at the forefront of this newly integrated world.

“You are correct. I am not of this world. I came here to Earth when Port Atwood bought a shop from our consortium. I am here on a mercantile visa, so to speak. Here is my proof. You should know what these Mercantile Licenses are from the Tutorial,” the Sky Gnome continued as a golden glowing parchment appeared floating over his hand.

“I am no threat to humanity or any other native race. I can’t buy land, conquer towns, or even attack anyone. The System bars me from doing anything detrimental to this planet. However, what I can do is offer you the deal of a lifetime. Aren’t you tired of the high prices of the System-run stores?

“This is a great opportunity for you to take the lead compared to other towns. While others pay seventy Nexus Coins for a Nexus Crystal, you would only pay a measly sixty in our stores. In fact, our rates are better on almost all materials and treasures, and we even stock various things that

are never available in the General Stores,” Calrin animatedly continued. “Your forces could save millions!”

The merchant’s little pitch actually garnered some interest, as a few of the delegates really looked tempted. Zac was actually hoping it would work, as a few branch stores would boost his revenue by quite a bit.

“That doesn’t explain the devil man,” an Italian delegate said with a frown, actually holding a rosary in his hands.

That brought the delegates back from their own scheming, but many still threw glances at the small gnome who stood next to Zac with a smiling face. Zac could understand them, as he knew how difficult it was to get a real mercantile force to build a shop in your town.

Perhaps if you were a leader of a flourishing town on a C- or B-graded planet, many consortia would fight for the opportunity. But at this point in time, the investment cost for the companies was just too high.

“The invading forces are banned from using arrays for a while longer. They wouldn’t be able to use a teleporter, but Ogras clearly came with us through the array,” Zac said, signaling Ogras to not make things worse. “Isn’t that proof enough he’s not an invader?”

“Yes, we did read about that in the information missive you provided, and it seems to match our own observations. However, while we haven’t seen any invading forces make use of arrays as of yet, it doesn’t mean there aren’t workarounds. We simply cannot verify it.”

Zac frowned as he looked at the delegates, going over their words once again, and came to an infuriating conclusion.

“You are implying that Port Atwood is consorting with the invaders, helping them against their fellow humans,” Zac said, a fit of smoldering anger starting to burn.

“It wouldn’t be too surprising that some people would betray their race to benefit themselves,” Francis said. “Your faction is simply suspect, as no one has been able to verify it even exists, even after weeks of searching and asking around.”

Enough was enough. Zac felt that Ogras was right: there was a limit to staying low-key, and sometimes it caused more trouble than it was worth. There was likely no one who had done as much for humanity as him.

Not only had he already closed an incursion, he had also provided vital intelligence. But even though he had been constantly fighting since the integration, he was looked at like he was a traitor, by some bureaucrats who hid behind their armies no less.

Zac's towering aura was released like floodgates, drowning the whole group of politicians. Gasps and groans escaped from their mouths, and a few even fell down on the ground. Only a few could remain standing, Thomas Fisher being one of them. But even he paled noticeably from the pressure of Zac's aura.

“You think I am a traitor, trying to learn your strategies and plans? Don't flatter yourselves. Ogras was right about one thing. If I was an enemy of humanity, I would simply kill you all and seize control of New Washington. There is nothing you can do to stop me. But you want proof? Fine.”

With a wave of his hand, his aura disappeared and instead a prompt was summoned and hovered in front of the group.

**[Planetary Aegis: First to stop an incursion in world. Reward: All stats +5, all stats +5%.]**

“You want to know how I am so strong? How we knew so much about the incursions? Port Atwood has been fighting tooth and nail since day one of the integration. The information missive you received was taken from one of the invaders,” Zac growled.

The delegates who were on the floor from Zac's forceful aura embarrassedly climbed to their feet, and were shocked when they saw the title screen hovering in front of them. There simply was no way to fake a System-run screen, as the System itself disallowed it. And his title was ironclad proof he had fought against the invaders, not for them.

“We have done our part. We have even defeated an incursion, and now we’re in the process of brokering peace with the Zhix in order to benefit all humanity. Port Atwood is standing on the forefront, protecting humanity,” Zac said as he glared at the delegates.

“I was shocked to hear that all of you together hadn’t managed to destroy a single incursion while our small force was able to do it. Perhaps it is time you started to get a move on instead of playing politics.”

His outburst had various effects on the people present. Ogras only grinned, looking very much in favor of his actions, whereas Calrin looked sick. Zac doubted the gnome feared for his life, but rather was fearing his sales pitch from earlier was for naught now.

The delegates ranged from angered to embarrassed, with a few looking at the screen thoughtfully. Thomas Fischer only sighed and shook his head.

“I am sorry about my colleagues’ words, Mr. Monk,” he said with a contrite face. “We simply needed to make sure about your allegiance. If our plans for the future were exposed, it would risk them not working, which would impact all of humanity. We have been fighting the incursions on multiple fronts for months, and honestly, it is a losing battle.”

Zac frowned as he listened intently.

“They are gaining power quicker than we are. After reading your information package, we learned the reason is that they are far stronger than us from the start and simply temporarily limited by the System.

“We believe that the longer things drag on, the harder it will be to expel the forces. Some of our analysts even believe that unless we defeat them within the year, then humanity is doomed. This is why we called so many forces here today.”

Zac sighed, as he had calmed down by now. He regretted his little outburst earlier. Not because he acted like a brute, but because he might have given out too much information just to defend himself. He quickly realized that showing the title

would have been enough, but he was angered into releasing his aura.

“But your victory gives us hope that our mission is doable. We hope we can rely on your power and expertise in the coming months, and together rid this planet of the invaders,” Asano added from behind Thomas.

“Port Atwood will do what we can in the war efforts, but we have our own things we are dealing with as well. So we can’t promise any specifics. And also, I’m sorry to rain on your parade, but the incursions aren’t our only problem,” Zac said, feeling tired.

“Oh? What do you mean?” Thomas asked with a frown.

“Ibtep, please explain to these people about the Dominators,” Zac said as he turned to the Zhix, who had stood by silently until now.

The Zhix ambassador took a step forward, obviously prepared, and without preamble, started explaining the situation and history of the Zhix. The delegates seemed slightly intrigued by hearing about the history of the Zhix, but when they learned that the Zhix home world had actually possessed cultivators even before the integration, they started frowning.

When Ibtep showed them the level of the one who called itself “Inevitability,” they were completely pale.



## CONSEQUENCES

*Those assholes*, Thea thought as she moved back and forth.

“Analyze them,” Henry said as he looked at Thea.

“They’re assholes,” she only muttered as she kept pacing about.

“Thea,” the old man said with some reproach in his voice.

She rolled her eyes but took the exercise seriously this time. She knew that her grandfather wouldn’t stop until she gave a satisfying answer. Some things hadn’t changed just because the world ended, after all.

“The monk is very strong. He beat up those people without breaking a sweat. The demon is also strong. I barely had time to react before John’s leg was pierced. Are you okay, by the way?” she said as she turned to their guardian.

“I am fine, my lady. With the help of the pill, I will have no problem fighting,” John quickly assured her.

“Focus,” Henry reproached.

“Well, they are also rich. They spent even more than we did,” she said, still feeling a bit peeved as she remembered that monk’s stupid face as he kept increasing the bid.

She didn’t know what that stone had been, but her **[Petalstorm]** craved it. But with the family’s operation underway, she had handed over much of her wealth, and she really hadn’t expected to need such an amount of money in the short run. Who knew those useless bureaucrats of the New World Government would actually have good things to sell?

“You’ve listed things that anyone with eyes could see. Focus. What happened in your altercation with the demon?” Henry said, obviously not satisfied with her performance.

Thea stopped pacing about and thought back to that moment. She had directed one of her petals to nick the throat of the glib demon, putting him in his place. She hadn’t been ready for the shameless response and still felt a bit flustered by the tactic. She knew the question the demon had asked was rhetorical, but she wondered what the answer was.

Would she have been able to kill the demon before Grandpa and John died? Thea quickly refocused, knowing her grandfather was expecting an answer. She went over the whole incident, focusing on every action and every facial expression of the members of the odd group.

“They weren’t afraid,” she blurted out with a start.

“Good. Continue.” Henry Marshall nodded with a small smile.

“The demon called it ‘a little pre-auction fun,’ and while he was mostly joking, he did truly not seem to take the situation too seriously. The monk seemed worried, but about the wrong things. He seemed afraid that the demon would actually hurt us rather than me hurting them. All in all, he seemed more annoyed than anything else,” she continued with a frown.

“What does this mean?” Henry urged her on.

“Neither the monk nor the demon really saw us, or me, as a threat. Ignorance can’t explain it, as they clearly knew our identities. The same can be said for their whole group; only the old Asian man seemed worried, but he was clearly just a weakling. They believe the demon is stronger than me, even though I’m in the third spot on the power list.”

“What was the power dynamic between the monk and the demon?” her grandfather asked, switching the line of questioning.

“Friends. No, wait,” she said as she frowned a bit. “The demon acted out two times; both times he stopped after the



monk intervened. It might not be official, but the monk is in the dominant position.”

“Good. Revisit the earlier question,” the old man said.

Thea stopped for a few seconds and went over her earlier line of reasoning.

“The demon might believe himself stronger, or at least equal to me. But judging from his personality, he would not take orders from a weakling, so the monk should be at least as strong as the demon,” she said, her eyes widening in realization. “The whole group believes that not only the demon, but even the monk can defeat me.”

That was an uncomfortable realization. She hadn’t stopped pushing herself for a second since the start. She’d even actually underwent a suicide mission and assassinated the incursion leaders, which made her clan’s current advances possible.

Anytime she walked the streets, she was met with fear or reverence. She didn’t care about all that, but the fact that she was looked down upon after all her struggles was quite maddening.

“Excellent. Remember, a small glance or an innocent conversation can expose far more than was intended. Everything has causes and consequences. That’s why it’s important to always act in a measured and deliberate manner. But you still are missing details,” Henry said.

“You seem to consider the demon an impulsive character, your opinion perhaps discolored by preconceived notions of what a demon should be like. I see the creature as a planning schemer hiding behind a guise. Just like we gained valuable information from the exchange, so did they.

“Your time in the wilderness has made you extremely strong, but your actions have become unnecessarily simplistic. If you remembered your old lessons, you would have gained information without giving any up,” Henry continued, and it looked like he was gearing up for another sermon.

Luckily for Thea, he was interrupted by an extremely dangerous feeling erupting from something in the area.

It was as though a monster had been released in the Opera House, making even Thea's neck hair stand on end. Even the invisible petals of her weapon started shivering as they danced around her.

"It seems the New World Government has angered Super Brother-Man. Causes and consequences," Henry said with a small smile as he looked in the direction of the ominous feeling.

—

"What do you all think?" Thomas said as he looked at the group.

Many of the delegates still looked a bit frazzled from the earlier encounter. Thomas couldn't really blame them, as there was a huge amount of adrenaline coursing through his vein at this very moment.

It was one thing to read a name on some ladder, and a whole other thing to be confronted by the very power that the list represent. The first spot on the Power Ladder wasn't for show, and Thomas didn't doubt for a second that Super Brother-Man could make good on his threats if he wished.

The army might be able to take him down in the end with concentrated focus-fire, but not before he'd killed all of the leaders.

"He could become a great asset. He has already shown goodwill with the information crystal," Asano Kobo said hesitantly.

"It's too dangerous. We can't have such a person running loose," the French representative said with a frown.

"How would we stop him? He would simply kill us if we tried to interfere," Johana retorted.

"He wouldn't be an asset if we can't control him. We would be running the risk of setting up a global network, only

for him to swoop in and crown himself king,” the French delegate added.

“Is there anything we know about him? You have met him before, Thomas. What have you found out?”

“We have strong reason to believe he is American and has some connection to the town Greenworth. It was one of the towns he asked about when he arrived at New Washington the first time, and he immediately rushed there after visiting an information broker,” Thomas began narrating.

“Not long after he arrived at Greenworth, he massacred the whole leadership of the town and erected a large monolith in a graveyard. Our hypothesis is that the cultivators who took control of Greenworth killed someone close to him, and he killed them all in revenge. Unfortunately, we have no way to find out exactly who was killed by the cultivators.

“We have been asking around as much as possible, but information is sparse, and our government workers have some trouble with cooperation, as our last representative ruined our reputation a bit. We have also been showing a picture of Monk to citizens of Greenworth in hopes that he would be recognized by someone. Still, we haven’t had any luck.

“There is one more morsel of information. I just received a report that Mr. Monk went around asking parties where their cities were located. When he found out that Mr. Bernard’s town was close to the undead incursion, he tried to broker a deal to use their teleporter.”

“How is this important information?” Johana asked.

“One of Greenworth’s cultivator groups was dropped off close to that location. Mr. Monk may be trying to locate someone important to him who might be in that group,” Thomas said.

“You’re saying we should capture his friends or family?” the Japanese delegate asked with a frown. “That seems to be playing with fire.”

“For now, we should focus on locating them, and from there try to extrapolate Mr. Monk’s identity. We already

believe that his town is likely named after himself, and that him saying the town is run by a council was largely a lie in order to keep his persona hidden. So if we find an Atwood in the cultivator group, we can almost identify him for sure,” Thomas said.

“And then what?” a delegate asked.

“See if we can place or make use of someone close to his inner circle. We would then gain a great asset, both for intelligence and, if needed, covert action.”

“I believe he will be instrumental in fighting off the incursions. You all know how bad it looks. If we can push him to the front lines, we would have a far better chance of succeeding,” he added.

“And after that?” a delegate asked worriedly.

“After that, we don’t need that kind of trouble in our backyard,” Johana said with a steely expression, and Thomas made no effort to refute her.

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“I am not sure about this. I want wealth as much as the next guy, but you need to be alive to enjoy it,” Davon said with hesitation.

“It will be fine as long as we are careful and plan everything out,” Red retorted with a sneer. “Remember, it wouldn’t be the first Ranker we killed.”

“Still, that guy seems pretty strong. I get the goosebumps just thinking about him. He clobbered those poor bastards like they were just some target practice. Didn’t even break a sweat.”

“He isn’t an immortal or a god just because he can clobber some people. His head will still explode from a high-caliber sniper round. No one is powerful enough to survive the strongest old-world weapons yet, so this is a small window of opportunity before they get too strong. If we shoot a few rounds in a staggered manner, no treasure or skill will be able to protect him.”

“His companions will be scrambling for safety, giving Ricky the opportunity to snatch the body and disappear,” Dany added.

“He easily dropped six million on a stupid rock; who knows how much stuff he has in is Cosmos Sack,” Red said enticingly, and even those hesitating couldn’t help nodding.

“We’ll skip the last part of the government stuff and set up our trap instead. We’ll go with the same setup as the last time. You all know what to do?”

The small group of eight somberly nodded.

“Good. In a few hours, we’ll be filthy rich.”

—

“Good job standing guard over the boss for so long,” Alea said with a smile as she handed Namys a cup of tea.

“It is my duty. Our duty, you would do well to remember. I have seen you cavort with the human. Never forget it was Lord Ogras who brought us out of misery and provided us a place in the Multiverse,” Namys tersely responded, but still accepted the cup.

Alea slightly smiled as she sat down next to the scarred demoness in the small gazebo at the outskirts of the town.

“I truly miss the crimson skies. Looking up at this endless blue makes me feel that I’m continuously walking through a dream, or that I am stuck in one of Janos’ illusions,” Alea said with a sigh as she took a sip of her own cup.

“Lord Ogras will bring us home in glory someday after he’s taken control of this planet. We’ll show Clan Azh’Rezak who their true leader is. Either they will bend the knee, or they will perish,” Namys answered, a fanatic sheen glimmering in eyes.

Alea glanced over with some sadness in her eyes and sighed again.

“I remember when I was a child in the slums of Ter’Ferizan. My mother was a prostitute, and who knows who my dad is. Mom always resented me since I came in the way

of her business, as she saw it. ‘Stole her youth,’ she called it. She beat me, abused me, and forced me to beg for food just to survive.

“Still I adored her, and I always felt she was the most beautiful person in the world as she donned her beautiful dresses and makeup for work. She was perfect in my eyes, and I was the one in the wrong,” Alea said, her eyes moistening as she looked at her sister of over twenty years.

“What are you talking about? Wh...” Namys asked, her words slurring a bit at the end.

“I am talking about the fact that strong emotions such as love or devotion can distort reality. You see Ogras as the dashing scion of Clan Azh’Rezak who once saved you, and will once again reclaim his place as the leader of us demonkind. From there, he will walk the time-tested path to become a true Arch Demon.

“But haven’t you seen? He’s changed. He’s found solace and happiness as he cut his ties to Clan Azh’Rezak. Returning home is the last thing on his mind, as this is truly his home now. But you have been walking around trying to get Ilvere and Janos to help you assassinate Lord Zac, unheeding of the fact that you are actually trying to destroy Ogras’ sanctuary. We tried talking you out of it, but you were too adamant,” Alea said as she looked sadly on Namys, who was slumping down in her chair. “Something needed to be done.”

“Wh... how...? Lord Ogras... avenge...” were the last words that escaped Namys’ mouth as her eyes glazed over and she exhaled her last breath.

“The carriage will not move forward if one of the wheels is aligned in the wrong direction,” Alea said, her eyes reddening. “Silly girl, do you think I would kill you unless I was ordered to?”



## HEAVINESS

“Feels good, doesn’t it?”

Zac was interrupted from his brooding and looked over at the grinning demon. The two were currently sitting in a secluded group of sofas, and the heavy atmosphere kept any curious onlooker far away.

“I think I may have shown too much of myself,” Zac said with a sigh.

Zac looked at Ogras for a second and shook his head ruefully. “I have a little sister. I believe I have found her whereabouts, but I am afraid that my identity is exposed, and they will use her to get to me.”

Since the beginning, he hadn’t really told the demons anything about himself, and he hadn’t even explained why he wanted to keep going on excursions through the teleporter. He was afraid of the same thing he was now, that someone would use his family to get to him. But he was running out of ideas, and Ogras usually had some methods up his sleeves.

To Zac’s surprise, he saw that the demon had turned uncharacteristically serious as he looked at him.

“The undead incursion?” Ogras asked with a somber face.

“In a town close by.” Zac nodded.

“You need to find someone who has a teleporter in the area,” Ogras mused.

“I did, but there seems to be some problem,” Zac said and recounted the conversation with the stocky man.



“I think I know what’s going on, but we’ll find out for sure in a bit,” Ogras said. “However, I have an idea that will ensure it doesn’t matter what little schemes those politicians have.”

“Oh?” Zac said with some hope.

Ogras took out two glass vials from his pouch and threw them over to Zac.

“The black vial contains a poison pill called [**Ten Steps to Hell**]. If ingested, the victim will wake up every night with searing pain in his chest, as though his lungs are on fire. Every night for ten nights, the pain will keep getting worse. On the tenth night, he will die. It is extremely painful, and only the most skilled E-grade healers would be able to treat it without an antidote. It should be incurable on this baby planet,” Ogras said with a sinister grin.

“How does this help me?” Zac frowned.

“The other vial contains the antidote,” Ogras explained. “Feed the poison to the man with the portal. Tell him to open the portal in nine nights. You promise you will give him the antidote when you arrive in his town. If you do or not is up to you. He may try to heal himself, but it will fail. The inevitable pain every night will be a painful reminder to comply unless he wants to die.”

Zac blankly stared down at the two small bottles in his hands, hesitant at what to do. He felt that if he actually went through with this, he would be stepping over some sort of threshold, arriving at a place where anything goes. The owner of the town by the undead incursion hadn’t done anything wrong, and this poison sounded like something horrifying to be subjected to.

Then again, it might be his only means to reach his sister. The more he thought about it, the more he felt that he had left a trail of breadcrumbs that led right to his identity. He remembered the feeling of walking through the park filled with unmarked graves, his father’s one of them.

Zac’s eyes hardened, and he put the two bottles into his pouch, which made a small smile emerge on Ogras’ face. If he

had to become a villain to make sure his sister was all right, then so be it.

“Thank you. I will use these if I see no other option. What do you want in return?” Zac asked.

He was quite clear about the demon’s personality, where everything was weighed in benefits.

“Let’s just say you owe me one,” the demon said with a small smile.

“Fine,” Zac sighed. “Now can you tell me what your actions were about in there? And don’t tell me it was pre-auction joking around again.”

“Aren’t you getting more astute? From what I’ve gathered, she is an elite from a well-established clan on this world. This Marshall Clan will be one of our biggest competitors for the dominion of Earth, provided we don’t get slaughtered by the invaders or these so-called Dominators,” Ogras said, his face turning serious.

“You were busy shrinking away from her glares, so I had to do something. We needed information about her powers and temperament. The returns were above expectations,” he continued.

“How was you getting your throat slit and us ruining our relationship count as good returns? And I have no interest in world domination.” Zac frowned.

“You need to think deeper, because other people are. Even if you say you don’t care, who would believe you? Your very existence is a threat to anyone trying to unify this planet. Unless you stop progressing and become mediocre, you will be forced into conflict, no matter what you want,” the demon snorted.

“And we gained a lot of information about Thea Marshall. For one, we know she has a bit of a short fuse. She could have just ignored me, but she didn’t. Such a thing can always be exploited in the future. We also know that her family is a liability for her. When I attacked that man, she clearly became

frantic but tried to hide it under a guise of disdain,” Ogras said.

Zac was surprised, as he’d only seen the exchange as an embarrassing diversion from the auction.

“It seems the Marshall Clan is quite large, which is a huge liability for a caring powerhouse. Having a large group of weak people to protect acts like an anchor tying you down. Finally, we learned a bit about her method of attacks,” he concluded.

“Oh, you figured out her trick? I couldn’t see what she did at all,” Zac asked.

“I’m not completely sure, but I know for certain that it was a bladed attack. I’ve been cut enough times by various things to know the difference between a Dao, skill, and blade cut. My belief is that she has one or multiple hovering bladed weapons out around her at all times.

“You remember Rydel, that asshole? I think she’s doing the same thing with a sword or a few daggers, but through either the properties of the weapons themselves or through a skill, they become invisible. She’s essentially creating a field of death around her, where a strike can come at any time. Quite a good method. A shame I wasn’t able to gauge her range,” Ogras concluded with a sigh.

Zac was stunned. Earlier, he really regretted bringing the demon along, but by now, he felt quite thankful that he actually did. He not only provided a last-resort solution to get to Kenzie, he even helped him realize his mistakes as he scouted out his enemies.

“What about almost kidnapping the movie star? Was that you wanting to gauge someone else’s reactions?” Zac changed the subject.

“No, that was just for me,” the demon said with a grin. “I haven’t given up yet, you should know. We should go rampage a bit, kill a few people. When she sees our powers, she’ll be much more willing to come back with us.”

Zac snorted but didn't say anything. He didn't know why, but it seemed like the demon was a bit on edge about something since he'd left his seclusion. Perhaps his gains weren't as good as he'd hoped, and he was a bit antsy. He'd explained his reasoning for accosting Thea, but at the same time, it felt like the demon was simply trying to create trouble to take his mind off other things.

It wasn't the time to start digging into those murky waters. If it was related to the demon's cultivation, he would never be truthful, and they were neither close enough nor drunk enough to have any sort of heart-to-heart about anything troubling. Besides, the demon wasn't the only one with problems.

Various troubles and issues were whirling through Zac's head as he closed his eyes for a bit and lay back on the sofa. There was the issue of Port Atwood and how to ensure the safety and progress of his emerging island kingdom. The third wave was coming as well, and he still had no idea what he could expect.

There was the issue of New Washington and their shrewd politicians. It felt as though the situation was getting out of hand, and a schism was forming between himself and his fellow humans. He even felt more comfortable around demons and the Zhix ambassador than his own old countrymen by this point.

There was also the heaviest responsibility of finding Kenzie. The feeling as he stood in front of the newly erected gravestone was etched into his memory, and he would rather die than not live up to the promise.

The issues of the incursions and Dominators were also a constant buzzing in the back of his head. Any other issues like those of Port Atwood, or even finding Kenzie, were all for naught unless something was done about these enemies. Time was running out, and unless something changed, the invaders would soon be too powerful to handle.

He felt he was weighted down by a mountain of responsibilities, and heaviness shrouded his mind. However, suddenly, it was as though various scattered thoughts and

impressions crystallized and ordered themselves up into something structured.

Zac fell into a trance as he somehow felt connected to the universe. He'd pondered daily on the various facets of Heaviness lately, and now it was as though the universe suddenly was showing him the answer sheet. His current emotions were actually represented in a small section of something far greater, and in another corner, he sensed his original insights.

The Dao of Heaviness was a low-tiered Dao, or a foundational Dao, as Alyn called it, but the vastness of that, he sensed, was extraordinary. He desperately tried to imprint the impression of it, but it was as though almost all of it slipped through his fingers. He managed to absorb some small snippets that were related to the emotional heaviness that he'd felt lately at least, and it seamlessly integrated into the fractal axe in his mind.

The dark color of the Heaviness-imbued half of the axe got deeper, and it radiated a stronger aura than before. Still, it was nowhere near the vastness he'd just felt.

He opened his eyes, only to see Ogras' face plastered just centimeters from him.

"What the hell are you doing?" Zac asked with some trepidation.

"Goddamn it, did you just have an epiphany? Just disgusting," Ogras said with a frown as he moved back, and even the little merchant, who had appeared from nowhere, sitting close by, threw an envious glance at him.

"Why were you so close that you almost straddled me, though?" Zac asked with a weird look.

"Don't flatter yourself. I was trying to sense anything to get some hints of how to get an epiphany of my own. Since your Dao Seeds are low level, I needed to get closer to sense the fluctuations," the demon spat.

"Did you find out anything?" Zac asked curiously.

“No, it was just a chaotic jumble. No idea how to get anything useful from that,” the demon answered with a grimace. “So what did you upgrade?”

Zac didn't answer, instead opening his menu with a smile.



## DAO SEEDS

He let the demon stay curious as he looked at his current status.

**Name: Zachary Atwood**

**Level: 54**

**Class[: F-Rare] Hatchetman**

**Race: [E] Human**

**Alignment: [Earth] Human**

**Titles: Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher**

**Dao: Seed of Heaviness – Middle, Seed of Trees – Early, Seed of Sharpness – Early**

**Strength: 287**

**Dexterity: 144**

**Endurance: 187**

**Vitality: 109**

**Intelligence: 69**

**Wisdom: 64**



**Luck: 77**

**Free Points: 0**

**Nexus Coins: 308,353**

Zac grimaced as he saw his Nexus Coins, the same feeling hitting him as the one he got when looking at his bank account after paying all his bills before the integration. He had felt extremely wealthy when he'd possessed over twenty million coins and went to buy the four Creator vessels, but in just a few hours, he'd spent around seventeen million with the help of the insatiable little merchant. He glared at the Sky Gnome, who studiously examined the roof after seeing Zac's face.

Zac knew that he would benefit from it in the end unless the gnome messed up badly, but it still left a bad taste in his mouth. Together with the expenditure of the boats, he was almost completely tapped out. Of course, he could convert some of his Nexus Crystals to quickly gain back what he spent and more, so he wasn't too worried.

Next, he opened up his Dao window to see how it looked.

**Heaviness (Middle): Strength +15, Endurance +10, Wisdom +5**

**Sharpness (Early): Dexterity +10, Intelligence +5**

**Trees (Early): Endurance +5, Vitality +10**

The total attribute reward from the Dao Seed had only doubled, but he knew that would be the case, so he wasn't disappointed. The reward would keep doubling at Late, then Peak mastery. Finally it would get a large boost if it was evolved or fused. This time, he was given +5 Strength, +5 Endurance and +5 Wisdom, likely due to the psychological aspect of the Heaviness he'd gained insight into.

Then again, the extra attributes were only a small bonus from the System. The main boosts came from the usage in battle. Adding the force of a middle-ranked Dao Seed compared to an early would be quite a boost.

And that wasn't even all. Zac looked over at the demon and, with a small smile, unleashed his Dao.

“Urh... What the hell?” Ogras said, with a face looking like he’d just bitten into a lemon. “What’s up with your Dao of Heaviness?”

It was the Dao Field he finally was able to emit. It looked like he was only able to extend it a bit over two meters, but that would improve with time. At the same time, two meters was all that was needed in a melee confrontation.

“I just added the aspect of Heaviness I gained from my insights,” Zac said.

“So weird. You chose Emotional Heaviness? Don’t get too maudlin before doing something drastic, okay? But I have to admit it is a pretty interesting addition to your Dao Seed. It will even serve as a mental attack apart from a normal restriction if you hit someone with your Dao Field in the middle of battle,” Ogras mused.

Everyone’s Dao Seeds weren’t the same. Even if Heaviness was a low-tiered seed, it was a vast concept. Zac had clearly felt it during his epiphany, and his current seed only consisted of two small snippets of a larger whole. The two parts he had gained insights into created his unique Dao Seed. A peak seed was only a couple more parts added to his current insight.

If he wanted to delve further into that Dao of Heaviness, he would have to upgrade it from a seed to a Dao Fragment, the thing above Dao Seeds. He wasn’t sure whether he would do that, though, or try to fuse it with sharpness at an earlier point. All in all, there was no right or wrong path when it came to Dao, only suitable and unsuitable.

Of course, if you were following a Heritage guide, there would be a wrong and right choice. Sometimes one or two parts of the Dao Seed usually needed to correspond to the requirement for the class upgrade, with the remaining ones enabling some customization to personal preference.

Apparently, there were even more stringent classes, where all parts needed to match. Generally, the more specific classes and the higher rarity ones had more stringent requirements, whereas the common classes were more forgiving.

In Zac's case, there was no roadmap, and he could only hope that there was some class waiting for him at the end of the tunnel. If not, he would have to take some risks to rack up achievements or meditate in order to gain more insight into his Daos or gain new ones.

Zac simply followed his heart, as he had no real way to gauge what any potential class upgrade would require. He'd gained insight into a mental component of Heaviness through his harsh experiences, and that was what was added. If he kept going down that path, he might turn into a spectral axe-man instead, whose strikes cleaved souls rather than the physical bodies.

Suddenly, he noticed something was off. Only their small group was sitting on the sofas, as the rest of the venue was empty.

"What's going on? How long was I out?"

"I don't know? An hour?" Ogras shrugged. "They started their information meeting not long after you zoned out. Since you were out of it, the insect and the old man went inside. We figured they'd be safe after your little outburst earlier, so we stayed behind here. Not like those guys will tell us anything we didn't already know."

Calrin nodded, looking a bit bored.

"So how did it go? Did you finish your quest?" Zac asked, a flash of irritation once again rushing through his mind as he was reminded of his almost completely emptied bank account.

"I need to resell the items first, but I believe I will make it. The quest was for me to triple my... ehm, your... money, and I believe that will be possible. Depending on the skills of your demon craftsmen, it might get even higher, but they don't seem very skilled," Calrin said, looking a bit proud.

"What are you smiling for? Rob me like that again and you'd better never leave your ratty compound again, or I'll find you and show you the Thousand Tortures," Ogras snarled.

"Brutes," Calrin only muttered, but he still shrank down a bit.

“I will need my Nexus Coins back before the wave starts. You have three days,” Zac only said.

“Thirty percent. I can return thirty percent before the wave; any more than that, and I’ll be forced to sell at a discount, which will hurt both you and me.”

Zac only stared at him for a while before sighing. “Fifty percent. Not a penny less.”

The Sky Gnome hemmed and hawed, but Zac was adamant about that level, and finally, the little merchant reluctantly acquiesced.

Zac once again closed his eyes after some more small talk, wanting to acquaint himself better with his new and improved seed. He was eager to find out whether his guidance system from **[Axe Mastery]** would be able to adapt to the new aspect of his insights, but now was not the time to start swinging his axe around. He could see the pathways, but others could not, so it would look like he had gone insane and started to attack everything around him.

The sound of the doors to the venue opening woke Zac up from his meditation, and after a bit, he saw Sap Trang and Ibtep hurrying back toward them.

“Ah, it’s good you feel better,” Mr. Trang said as he looked relieved.

“Better?” Zac said with some confusion.

“Ah yes, I told you not to drink that much. Passing out with your attributes, embarrassing,” Ogras said with a shake of his head.

It seemed the two were putting up a play, but for whom, Zac had no idea. Still, he tried to play along and hesitantly nodded.

“Was there any useful information?” Zac asked Mr. Trang.

“Not much; most of it came from us, to be honest. They have released an updated version of the computer program you showed me the other day. It more clearly shows the incursion zones. They also provided a decent amount of detail about

each and every incursion and even provided dockets,” the fisherman answered, showing a pretty thick stack of papers.

“They also brought up new information from Ibtep. However, they didn’t mention you at all. They only said that an ally of the government had provided the info. They never gave Port Atwood any credit,” he said with a frown.

“That’s okay, I didn’t share it to gain anything from it. I simply wanted people to be aware of the situation so they could start preparing themselves,” Zac said with a wave of his hand.

“You should be a bit more caring in the future. That information was valuable, and it would have helped boost our reputation. While it might not seem important, the image the commoners hold of us might become essential in the future. If we come to conflict with the World Government, what then? Whose side would the people take? The government who, at least from the looks of it, is tirelessly fighting against the invaders? Or us, the unknown force?” Ogras said.

“Okay, okay. I’ll be more selfish next time. Was there anything else? Did they talk about the teleporters or anything like that?” Zac asked.

“No, but it seems they have some big plan. They alluded to it multiple times during the presentation. I think they’ll tell us more in the last part.”

Zac nodded as he looked at the three aliens in the party.

“I’ll go to the last meeting; you stay with these three, Mr. Trang. There are a few Ishiate who will come back with us; please arrange things with them. They are actually cultivators originally from one of the two towns we found, and might be a great help in bringing them into our fold.”

Soon the break was over, and people once again streamed into the venue. This time, it was only the humans, and Zac saw the Ishiate being shown to a side area by some attendants.

He went to his original position and nodded to Nigel, who sat beside a snoring Billy. He looked over at the Marshalls, but the trio was pointedly ignoring him this time. He wasn’t sure

whether to be relieved or peeved but simply shrugged it off. Ogras' lesson was still fresh in his mind, but he knew he still didn't possess the means to act and talk in a manner that gave away no information. So he was happy being left alone.

Thomas Fisher walked up to the stage with his group, and the murmurs in the venue died down.

“Welcome back to the last segment of today's activities, and perhaps the most important one. Those here today are a significant portion of the world's elite, with over twenty of the Rankers present in this room,” Thomas said, creating some surprised murmurs.

“Humans are beset on all fronts by enemies. And let me be honest. They are stronger than us, they are more used to Cosmic Energy, and they are more brutal. In less than half a year, only 20% of humanity is still alive, and it honestly looks bleak. But we are not without hope.

“A large reason why the invaders can run rampant is that there haven't been concentrated and organized efforts in rebuffing them. The local forces have fought valiantly, but they have stood alone against a vastly superior force. Too many brave men and women have already died in this ignoble way.

“The solution is simple. We need to unite and fight as one entity. Alone, we might be weak, but together, we will stand strong. And we have found a way to make this happen.”



## FORMING FACTIONS

Zac frowned as he listened to Thomas' speech. While the words sounded good, it felt to him that it wasn't that simple.

"Why don't you just drop a few nukes on the incursions? It's better we get some radiation than having to risk our lives," a man in the back row shouted, and many seemed to agree, by the nods.

"Honestly, that was our first thought," Thomas said with a sigh. "Better we create no-go blast zones than having people get slaughtered or turned into zombies. But soon after the integration happened, we made a troubling discovery. All our weapons of mass destruction and most of our high-capacity arsenals are simply... gone."

"WHAT?" Multiple shouts erupted in the hall. Many looked fearfully at each other.

Zac was surprised at the news, but not overly so. He'd had the same idea as the man who shouted earlier, but if they hadn't dropped the nukes even after billions of people died, they simply weren't able to. Seeing as the System wanted a struggle to create powerhouses, it didn't make sense for it to leave behind technological weapons that simply erased all struggle. A nuke at every incursion in the beginning would swiftly have ended the invasions, after all.

He also noticed that while some seemed shocked, many took the news with stride. It obviously wasn't a too tightly guarded secret.



“All nukes, chemical warfare, and high-capacity bombs are gone. Most of our airplanes, carriers, and battleships are gone as well. They weren’t stolen or destroyed, but simply removed. We are quite sure it is the doing of the System itself, as even any reference to an atom bomb is removed from all computers and even books. If you find an encyclopedia, you’ll notice that there is just a blank space in the pages where the restricted information once was.”

Even Zac was shocked this time, once again reminded just how powerful the System was. To remove even any mention of the things it didn’t like was a horrifying capacity. However, they were still all talking about it, so hopefully, it meant that the System at least couldn’t alter memories.

“To make matters worse, we can’t build them. We are not allowed. An atomic bomb is not an extremely complicated thing, and many of our scientists are able to construct them. But as soon as we make some headway, the prototypes vanish into thin air,” Thomas added. “In essence, the System wants us to fight with our own hands.”

Many in the room looked despondent. Clearly, they had hoped the government would solve the problems for them, and perhaps that something was just holding them up. But Thomas Fischer’s declaration dashed any such hope. Obviously, rifles and handguns were still around, but their efficacy was limited.

“But do not worry, we have a plan,” Thomas said, bringing the attention back to him.

“We have representatives present from all corners of the world, meaning we have the means to quickly travel and assist everyone, no matter where they are. However, this doesn’t happen in practice. Why?” Thomas asked as he looked over the audience.

“It’s simple. There are only two public teleporters at the moment. Ours and the Cradle of God. And you should all know by now that whoever enters the Cradle never comes back. We do not know if it’s controlled by a traitor, a powerful Dominator, or even a foreign force that somehow has

circumvented the rules. So in essence, only New Washington is accessible to the forces of the world.

“All other teleporters are closed, and I do not blame you. Leaving the teleporters open would subject your towns and citizens to danger at any time. But there is a solution. The New World Government is happy to announce that we are on course to have the first System-approved Lord within the month.”

Murmurs started through the area, many looking surprised at each other.

“For those of you who do not know, it means that new forms of settings of the teleporters can be enabled. It is possible to create a closed system where all the portals of allied towns are public to each other, whereas everyone outside the network can't access us. That would give us an immense edge in the fight against the invaders.”

Many nodded, but there were a few people who looked like Zac felt, troubled. There was no such thing as a free lunch, after all.

“We would be able to coordinate both defense and assault. Our warriors would be able to go from hotspot to hotspot and keep reaping the rewards. Because remember, while incursions are dangerous, they are also a huge opportunity to gain power. It is not without reason that many of the high Rankers have their base of operations close to incursions,” Thomas added.

“This network would not only help with battle, but with all manner of society. It would help with trade, information, and even relocation efforts for those who try to reach their loved ones. And every time a new town joins the collective, we all grow a little bit stronger.

“Throughout history, mankind has been splintered and our own worst enemy. But if there is one thing that has always marked our species, it's our adaptability and ingenuity. We haven't really come together as one race before, but we haven't been tested like this before either. The New World Government is a living testament to the possibility of this.

“Thirty-eight government towns are already slated to join the network as soon as we can create it. It would allow us to travel through large parts of our new world,” Thomas said, letting the audience sit in the silence and ponder the implications.

“Can anyone join?” a voice shouted from the back.

“For now, yes,” another man said as he stepped forward next to Thomas Fischer, and Zac recognized him as one of the delegates of another government town.

“However, we need to make sure of the safety of the network. We will do a site visit to your town to ensure no atrocities are going on, or that letting you join the network would impact the others negatively in some other way. We would also place a permanent government liaison in your town to keep an open channel of communications,” he continued.

“But do not worry. The control of the town and its development is not something the New World Government will interfere in. There are only two requirements. The first is that the town accepts the newly drafted Rule of Law that is there to ensure the human rights of all citizens. The second is contribution to the war efforts,” Thomas added.

“Let no one forget. The largest reason that we need to combine our forces is to fight back against the invaders. Someone who is not interested in contributing to humanity has no place in our network,” he said as he slowly looked over the population with a steely gaze.

“Edmonton is ready to fight for humanity,” a large man suddenly said with a booming voice as he stood up.

“Little Creek is ready to fight for humanity,” another woman with a huge scar across her face soon added not long after.

One by one, a lot of people stood up and professed their readiness to fight for humanity. Zac silently looked on the spectacle with a small frown. His time with Ogras had made him a bit more cynical, and he instinctively felt that the

audience participation in this last meeting were plants by the governments.

The forces might be real, and their towns were ready to join, but their participation was likely already negotiated and done before this meeting started. This was only reinforced as he saw the stocky man who ruled the town close to the undead incursion stand up and profess his allegiance.

Zac knew then and there that any hope of him using the teleporter through normal means wouldn't be possible. It was clear that the government was setting up a sphere of influence. There was no way that Zac would join them at this point in time, so he would be cut off from the teleportation network.

They would use the safety in numbers and promise of becoming stronger to rope more and more forces into joining. It was true what Thomas said, each time someone joined their alliance, it would get stronger, and the outsiders would become more and more ostracized.

He threw a glance at the Marshalls and was somewhat relieved to see that the three seemed to be completely unaffected by the commotion in the room. A quick look over at Billy showed that the giant was still snoring away, obviously uncaring about what was going on, but the slight frown on Nigel's face showed that they weren't one of the forces that had made a deal with the government.

"What if we don't join?" a loud voice suddenly asked after the hubbub had died down a bit.

"We hope that as many as possible will join us in our fight, but we understand that some have their own aspirations. We will not force anyone to join unless they feel comfortable with it. However, please beware that New Washington's teleporter will become private again a month after the network is set up," Thomas answered.

"Having an open Node in the network will risk the whole alliance, and we can't allow that. The month is so that all forces of the world will be given ample time to consider our offer. It will also hopefully allow a few more forces to gain a teleporter and join us. But after that, we need to think about

the safety of our citizens, and from there on, there will be no more admission,” the politician continued.

“At certain intervals, the teleporter will open, though, to allow teleportation to New Washington only. That would be an opportunity to join us at a later date,” another delegate added.

“As soon as the members have been finalized and the network secured, we will begin our campaign to retake our land from the foreign invaders. I will not go into specifics at this time due to security concerns, but our goal is to completely close all the incursions plaguing New Earth before the anniversary of the integration,” Thomas said.

A stunned silence spread through the hall after the strong declaration. Clearly, the New World Government wasn't messing around. Zac personally was skeptical. They talked big for a group of people who still hadn't closed a single incursion. At the same time, he didn't want to create a scene, since he couldn't do the job alone, and if humans could organize and pick up the slack, it would be for the best.

The meeting kept going, and the government officials spoke a bit more about the specifics of the future alliance and fielded many questions. It became increasingly clear that the New World Government had adopted a polite “you're either with us or against us” approach. On the surface, it was completely up to anyone whether to join or not.

But in practice, they meant that unless you joined the fold, you would be alienated from the rest of humanity. You wouldn't get access to the teleporters, and it even became apparent that trade and information sharing would only happen within the alliance as well.

Zac was sure there were some additional caveats that were not disclosed at this time. He was pretty sure that the government wouldn't try to freeze out the Marshall Clan, since a retaliation from them with Thea as a poster child might splinter the alliance. Hopefully, that type of courtesy would extend to himself as well. His problem was that while his pseudonym was well known, he was not.

Personally, he was unsure what to do. He should be happy that the government was trying to organize people to fight against the incursions. But more than that, there was a deeply rooted unwillingness to hand over the reins of Port Atwood. They said they would let everyone have autonomy, but the stronger the alliance got, the more power would become centralized.

He sighed as he kept trying to think of solutions of what to do, as his eyes every now and then darted to the leader of the town close to the undead incursion.



## HEADING OUT

Zac walked out of the concert hall with a frown on his face from the information. He still hadn't found any answers to what to do in his situation, and could only turn to his teammates for answers. After a quick glance around, he found them sitting on another group of sofas, the whole table in front of them filled with various foods and drinks.

Zac had thought the demon was once again the culprit, but seeing the little gnome lying prone with his belly protruding like a little ball while the Zhix was constantly burping, he wasn't so sure anymore. He also saw the two Ishiate he had been talking to earlier sitting next to the group. As soon as they saw Zac arrive, they quickly stood up and slightly bowed.

Zac was a bit confused, but thought perhaps his group's wanton spending during the auction was taken as a sign of great power. Ogras looked over with a glass of whiskey in his hand.

"So they are trying to create a force with access to their teleporters?"

"You knew?" Zac asked, a bit surprised.

"Well, they didn't have a lot of other options if they wanted to remain in charge. Of course, they will sooner or later realize that the distance of a continent is just a small inconvenience, and controlling the arrays isn't enough to seize control."

"It seems they already have quite a few members already, though," Zac retorted with a sigh as he sat down.



From there, he detailed the general outline of the New World Government's plan.

“Just weaklings banding together to feel strong. It's not too bad. There are various ways to circumvent that. You can just take control of a town close to a government member. If you need to use their network, just teleport to your own town and run over to theirs,” Ogras said with a shrug, clearly not worried about the situation.

“Besides, the Multiverse is a place where power holds sway. Power structures like theirs never work out in the end, with just a few notable exceptions,” Ogras said, and even the gnome, who was fond of bureaucracy, seemed inclined to agree, as he gave an unwilling nod.

“Your world is still in its infancy, and you still hold notions of equality. But you will soon see the reality when people start to evolve. A D-grade Hegemon could destroy half of New Washington with a flick of his hand; what would he care about their little schemes? He'd just seize the whole network if he wanted it. A dragon doesn't negotiate with ants,” Ogras said.

“You may be right, but that is still far off. In the immediate future, they will have a commanding advantage,” Zac retorted with a frown.

There was not much left to do in the venue apart from one thing. It had become increasingly clear during the meeting that using the teleporter to get to the undead incursion would be hopeless, no matter what he said. It was time to go with Ogras' plan.

“I have no choice. I will need to use your method for access to the teleporter,” Zac said with a grimace.

The demon only nodded, whereas the others looked at them a bit curiously. Zac wouldn't explain what he was about to do, as he felt pretty sick about it already, and instead looked out over the floor. It appeared luck was on his side, as he saw the robust man head toward the area of the toilets. They were around a corner some distance away from the general area and were quite secluded.

“I will be right back,” Zac said with a somber expression, and while using [**Loamwalker**], he disappeared.

Between his attributes and the skill, it essentially looked like he teleported, as he was one second sitting, and the next second gone, only a flash of his afterimage leaving a trace. In no time, he was by the toilet and was relieved to see that there was no one there at the moment.

Zac grabbed the neck of the robust man from behind without a word, and before the poor man had time to react, he was dragged into the handicap bathroom with his throat gripped in an iron vise.

Zac was now holding him up in the air with one arm, having taken out his axe with the other. The large man was held a decimeter above the ground, his legs swinging widely and his face quickly turning red.

“Scream and I will start cutting off body parts,” Zac said with a deadly stare.

He had already decided to go through with this despicable act, so he would go all the way with it. He’d play the villain if it meant getting access to the teleporter.

“To help you understand your situation, I’ll show you something,” Zac continued as he displayed the part of his status screen that showed him being level 54.

Of course, he didn’t display any of his stats or his name, as the level was enough to convey his message. The man was still unable to breathe, but after having seen the prompt, his eyes widened in terror, and he stopped trying to get himself free.

“You should understand who I am by now. You can try screaming for help, but the government do not dare make an enemy of me and would probably sacrifice you rather than getting themselves into trouble,” Zac continued as he placed the man down on the ground.

He didn’t actually know if it was true, but it did have a note of truth in it. The man took a few deep steadying breaths, but he did comply as he warily stared at Zac.

“What do you want? You were at the meeting; they have set up all kinds of rules that I can’t just break as I wish. Don’t you think I’d have taken the money if I could?”

“What’s your name?” Zac simply asked.

“I am John Bernard,” the large man hesitantly answered.

“Are you under a contract of servitude?” Zac continued.

“No, why?” the man answered with a confused stare.

“Good,” Zac said as a small glass bottle appeared in his hand.

Zac opened the stopper and took out the pill, which emanated a pungent odor.

“Wh—” the other man said, but didn’t get further before Zac slammed the pill down into his throat with lightning-quick speed.

John was so surprised that he instinctively swallowed the pill, and Zac nodded, satisfied.

“The pill I just had you eat is a unique poison called [**Ten Steps to Hell**],” Zac said, hiding nothing. “Every night, you will experience a tremendous pain that will be so bad that you will think you have gone to hell. Every night, the pain will get worse, and on the tenth day, the pain will be so bad that you will die.”

“WHAT? Why are you doing this?” the man said, looking positively horrified.

“Because I have the antidote,” Zac answered as he took out the other bottle. “One week from now, open your teleporter for five minutes at 3 a.m. New Washington time. If I do not pass through the teleporter, do so again the next night at the same time. When I come through, I will hand you the antidote. And a handsome reward,” Zac explained, adding the sentence about a reward after a brief hesitation.

The man looked at the glass bottle in Zac’s hand like a drowning man looks at a life raft.

“Why not just give me the bottle, and I promise I will open the portal. There’s no need for all this,” the man entreated.

“I prefer to do things my way. And you may be scheming all kinds of things right now, but the following days will show you the reality. Feel free to visit as many healers as you wish. I didn’t get to the top of the Ladder without having my own means. No one on Earth will be able to save you except for me.”

Zac felt a sour taste in his mouth as he played the villain. He simply channeled his inner Ogras, thinking of what he would say to get what he wanted in this situation.

“Remember. One week from now, 3 a.m. sharp,” he finished and disappeared before the man had time to say anything else.

Soon he was back at the table and saw Ogras grinning at him.

“The things we do for love, huh?” he said.

Zac recognized the quote and only rolled his eyes in response.

“We are done here. We should have them take us to a hotel. I want to stock up on various things for Port Atwood, and hopefully we will find some experts in various fields who will accompany us back,” Zac said. “That is provided they will let us stay, though.”

There was no point in pretending that he wasn’t in charge anymore. No one would believe Sap Trang was the leader instead of Zac after his display of power earlier.

He was unsure what the government had decided regarding his party. They had been ushered straight to the venue after arriving, and it seemed they were considered somewhat a risk. But at the same time, they had clarified their position here at the auction, and hopefully, the government wouldn’t bar them from exploring the town a bit.

Last time he was here, he hadn’t really explored New Washington, as he had been eager to get to Greenworth. But this time, there were various things he wanted to get for his

city. There were all kinds of things the town was in need of, from seeds to materials, and even technology. Most of it could be bought through Calrin, but Zac suspected such things would hold almost no value to the current settlements, which meant they could make huge savings.

He was also hoping he could snag a couple of solar panels for himself, but he wasn't too hopeful. The government was clearly searching for them as well in order to power their town, and now they had around fifty towns to power.

"If the things in the auction were the best of the best, then there might not be much of value in the town," the gnome said hesitantly.

"There is a bazaar where independent cultivators and hunters can sell their things. Who knows what they've found while out farming kills in the forests. I am sure that many of those here are hoping to sell their own things as well," Zac said, causing the little merchant to perk up.

"Can we even go? That little lass didn't seem willing to let us into the city," Ogras interjected.

As if summoned, Julia actually emerged from a door not much later and started walking toward them.

"I hope today has been satisfactory to you all," she said with a smile as she arrived at Zac's table. "I understand you have spoken with the leaders of the New World Government, who have given your party access to the town. Will you be staying here for a bit, or are you heading back to Port Atwood immediately?"

Zac's brows rose, as he didn't expect the government to be so amenable after their little altercation. Especially not considering their stance with their plans for a closed network.

"We're planning on visiting the bazaar and leaving tomorrow," Zac simply answered.

"Excellent. In fact, there will be an informal gathering at the bazaar in roughly two hours, where many of the guests here will sell some of the things they've found, or trade them

for other treasures more suited to them,” Julia answered with a nod.

Zac wasn't surprised, as the government didn't sell commissioned items, but only their own. Many should have found things that they had no use for, and desired to trade them for something that could give immediate benefits.

“The car is waiting. I will take you to one of the still-operating hotels that is located close to the bazaar,” Julia said, and the group started to walk out.

“It was an impressive spending spree you had, Mr. Monk, even outbidding Ms. Marshall,” Julia said with a smile as she shot a glance at him as they walked toward the exit. “You and two high Rankers fought tooth and nail over that stone. It must have been something quite impressive. A few of our scientists are a bit unsure whether they made a good deal or a horrible one after seeing your bidding war.”

“Well, it was an interesting stone. Who knows if it will be worth the sky-high price, though?” Zac answered with a shrug of his shoulders. He wasn't about to disclose the fact that the stone seemed to be something that all Tool Spirits wanted.

Zac went over to the Ishiate before they left, to exchange some pleasantries. Unfortunately, there was no way for them to create an alliance or their own network at the moment, as none of them were Lords. Eventually, they just extended some loose promises of future cooperation.

The plan of the government was to create a network by piggybacking their Lord's access to the improved teleporters. Every non-Lord who wished to join would become a vassal. In practice, they wouldn't go by feudal rules where the Lord actually commanded the vassals, but that was just what the government said. Who knew if this Lord would get a taste for power and want more. Then again, Zac suspected the government had some sort of fail-safe for that situation.

The group finally exited the opera house, accompanied by the two steampunk Ishiate, and went down toward the stairs toward the waiting limousine. Julia had been a bit curious about the two new companions, but it was easily explained.

Hopefully, there wouldn't be any further complications if they managed to recruit some people back to the town.

Suddenly, Zac froze after having walked down the small set of stairs, as an intense hair-raising sense of danger exploded in his mind.





## ASSAULT

A lot of Zac's actions were born from instinct since he'd been in constant battle for months. Without hesitation, a green shield encapsulated him, and the Dao of Trees spread through his body as he brought out his axe.

However, he didn't even have time to look around before an extremely strong impact slammed into his shield, soon after accompanied by an enormous gunshot. Luckily, the shield held true, and a large-caliber bullet turned into hot molten metal that fell harmlessly on the ground in front of him. However, the danger sense only increased, and he once again summoned the second charge of his gear, this time gearing to move away from the group with his movement skill.

The others in the group looked on, gaping, with only Ogras quickly reacting. Shadows gathered around him, and he safely disappeared from the line of fire.

Zac was just about to step forward to disappear with **[Loamwalker]** when a second impact slammed into his new shield, leaving him defenseless. He barely had time to inch his head away when a third bullet grazed the side of his forehead. Everything turned white for a second before he found his bearings, only to find himself on his back on the ground.

He felt a scorching pain on his head, but a quick mental check showed he was largely fine. Since he'd upgraded to E-grade race, he held a greater command of his body and could generally tell the state of all his body parts. He was extremely relieved he'd focused almost all of his stat points in Dexterity lately in order to match his other monstrous stats.

He wouldn't have been able to avoid that last round without the quick movement Dexterity allowed, and after feeling the power of those bullets, he held no delusions he would be able to tank them like normal rifle rounds. Just as he was planning on getting up, he saw an unfamiliar man almost teleport to his side, and immediately touched his chest.

Zac frowned as he stared at the man, who looked back at him with a horrified face. He immediately moved to flee, but an iron grip held him in place. Zac didn't know what kind of skill the man had used to approach him, but he used the same method as he utilized against Ogras to keep him in place, infusing his hand with Cosmic Energy.

The man struggled to get free, but a punch with the force of a truck in his gut made him curl up like a shrimp in the air. Zac looked around like an enraged beast as he got up, looking for any co-conspirators of this man while holding his captive like a shield. This clearly was some sort of assassination attempt, and this man was only responsible for taking his corpse.

"Are you okay?" a frazzled Julia asked from the distance as she waved soldiers to search for the culprits.

"Just this much won't kill me," Zac succinctly said as he turned his eyes to the man he'd caught.

"Who ordered you to attack me?"

"Please, mercy," the man croaked, still shaking after the punch to his stomach.

"Mercy? We don't do that," Ogras with a sneer said as he materialized back by the group.

In his hand, he held a sack, which he summarily threw to the ground, causing six decapitated heads to roll out, each one with a horrified look on its face. On his back, the demon had two huge sniper rifles that looked strong enough to blow holes in tanks, and he was completely covered in blood.

"What the f—" Julia screeched and backed away as she saw the grisly scene.

“Answer him, or you will join my collection,” Ogras said with a demonic grin at the captured man, who looked horrified at the heads.

“Please, we weren’t ordered. We only wanted your Cosmos Sack,” the man cried.

“That’s why you tried to shoot me in the head with those rifles?” Zac retorted with a glare as he touched his forehead with his free hand.

It came back bloody, and Zac was enraged even further. It didn’t matter whether they were ordered or simple bandits; they had almost killed him, even though he had no connection to them. If it wasn’t for his large amount of Dexterity and his defensive Dao, his head would have exploded like a watermelon.

Zac slapped the man hard enough to knock him out, and threw him over like a sack to Ogras.

“Can you properly question him later?” Zac said.

“I guess. They did give me these new toys after all, so I should give something back,” he said as he looked at his two rifles.

“I am sorry about this incident. This is partly due to our oversight. I actually recognize this man; his name is Ricky. He’s part of a small elite group called the Red Mercenaries. Your friend is... holding... most of the other members in his sack. Including Red himself,” Julia said apologetically to Zac.

“Where are they from?” Zac tersely asked.

“They came through a private teleporter. We do not actually know which town they are from. More importantly, please let the government take over from here. A crime has been committed, and these men attacked you in the middle of New Washington. Please hand over the criminal and their restricted equipment,” Julia said, shooting a glance at the two rifles on the demon’s back.

“What equipment?” Ogras said with a blank face as he slowly put the rifles in a Cosmos Sack one by one, drawing a glare from Julia.

“This one is coming with us. If you have any complaints, you will have to take it up with Thomas Fisher. There has been no discussion of the details of our future cooperation. For now, we will maintain the status of diplomatic immunity, and we will deal with our issues by ourselves,” Zac said with a glance.

In a sense, it was a declaration of independence. He was essentially saying that he and his group would do whatever they wanted and that they did not agree to follow any regulations from the New World Government. It was both a show of strength and a way for Zac to test the government’s patience. But more importantly, he was pissed off and in no mood to accommodate the government, who might even be responsible for the attack for all he knew.

Julia frowned as she looked down on the unconscious captive, but after some hesitation, she didn’t bring up her demands again. She simply walked over to a soldier and whispered some things before she led Zac’s group back to the limousine.

The atmosphere in the car was quite oppressive after the events, and any discussions quickly died out. Soon they arrived at their destination, a large, luxurious high-rise hotel. Ogras caused quite a scene as he walked in like a bloody devil, but Julia quickly smoothed things over. Zac had already eaten a healing pill in the car and wiped off the blood on his head, so he was essentially looking normal again, apart from his frown.

It seemed like the hotel was managed by the government at the moment, which made sense, as there still shouldn’t be too many travelers needing temporary places to rest. That might change, though, when New Washington became a hub in their network in the future, and Zac couldn’t help but be a bit jealous.

He was fighting tooth and nail to simply avoid his emerging town becoming overrun by beasts, but these people had quite a laid-back life. It seemed that this town hadn’t really been tested at all since the start, and Zac wondered exactly how this kind of environment could create a System-approved Lord.

They were given their own wing on a floor, but only a few actually went up to check the rooms out. Zac sat down in the bar and ordered a bottled beer. It cost 1000 Nexus Coins, which was far and above what food usually cost, but to Zac, it didn't really matter.

Everyone came streaming down one by one, and soon only the demon was missing. It only took twenty minutes for Ogras to return looking freshened up, any sign of blood scrubbed away and wearing new robes. When he came back, he wasn't carrying the man they'd captured either, giving Zac a clear indication of Ricky's fate.

"So what's the plan?" Ogras said as he looked a bit excited, with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

"We have two things to do. Buy materials and find people. I think we can split up," Zac said, still feeling angry over the attack earlier. "I'll accompany Sap Trang, who will focus on acquiring talent, acting the part of the bodyguard. Calrin, I assume, will go to the bazaar to make some deals."

The gnome nodded, looking a bit excited.

"If you can try to get talks going for a few branches, I don't care if they're a part of the new government network or independent forces. It's all money into our pockets," Zac said.

"I agree. We have a great opportunity here. It will take some time before competing consortiums deign to come to this planet, giving us a good head start to seize control of the market. If they arrive at a later point, we can just squeeze them out. Even a dragon can't fight the local snake," the gnome said with a grin.

"I'll go with the little blue bastard; seems more fun," Ogras said.

"Good. What about the prisoner?" Zac asked.

"He's in my pouch," the demon answered with a grin, confirming he was dead.

"Tbtep, who do you wish to go with?"

“I will join you. I am curious to see what professions you humans have. I feel your societies are more diverse than that of the Zhix, and learning more might strengthen our hives,” the Zhix answered.

“Good. As for you two,” Zac said as he turned to the two Ishiate who had joined their party, “you’re free to do whatever.”

“We will go to the bazaar to look for things that could help Cogstown,” Shea, the female Ishiate, said.

“Very well, we will leave early tomorrow, at 7 a.m. New Washington time.”

With that, they were done and headed out of the hotel. Their odd party kept getting glances from all directions, but they were used to it by now. However, four men walked up to them just as they were about to exit.

“Mr. Monk and company, we’re from the New World Government, and we have been tasked with accompanying you during your excursion. Please do not take it the wrong way. It is simply to allay any troubles that your... unique party composition might bring,” a man politely said.

“Fine,” Zac lightly said after some consideration.

He didn’t really care if the government employees saw their activities. It was not like they could hide it if they brought new people with them through their teleporter tomorrow.

Soon they were walking through the bazaar, which was a huge square and the neighboring streets. There was a surprising number of hawkers selling everything from hides of mutated beasts to Old World luxury objects such as perfume and jewelry. There were also quite a few stalls with street food. All in all, it created a bustling atmosphere that made a jarring contrast to the fact that 80% of the world’s population had perished in the last months.

As soon as they entered the commerce area, Calrin and Ogras veered off, with two of the government employees

following in tow. As for Zac's group, they looked around for a bit before they stopped.

"Just how are we going to recruit people?" Zac asked with some hesitation as he looked around.

"I have an idea, but it would require us to expose a bit about Port Atwood," the old fisherman said.

"Oh?"

"Well, it's already well past lunch, as the auction took up much of the day. We only have a short time to convince people to actually join us and move to an unknown area. They would be taking a huge risk compared to the relative safety of this town. We need to give them a good enough reason," Sap Trang said.

"Money?" Zac ventured, but the fisherman shook his head.

"You."

"Me? What do you mean?" Zac asked confusedly.

"You're so strong, you might not realize the reality of most people walking these streets. They might look happy, but they are scared. Terrified. There are real-life monsters just outside the gates, and any day, those monsters might break through those walls and kill them," Mr. Trang explained. "But if they know Port Atwood is protected by the strongest man alive, and that it is safe enough that we only need to recruit noncombat classes, a few might risk it."

Zac mulled it over for a few seconds, but then finally nodded. The government leaders would have to be sleeping on the job if they still didn't know he was either Super Brother-Man or Salvation by now. Since the milk was already spilled, they might as well use his identity to their advantage.

"So what do you propose?" Zac asked, and the fisherman only answered with a big toothless grin.





## GAINING REPUTATION

“Come join the town of the strongest man alive. We need all sorts of noncombat classes. Doctors, scientists, blacksmiths, and farmers. Come one, come all! Carpenters, janitors, brewers, and craftsmen! All are welcome to sign up! Join Port Atwood, home of Super Brother-Man, the safest place on Earth!”

Zac could barely stop himself from blanching as Sap Trang walked back and forth in front of their gaudy stall, tirelessly shouting out superlative statements about Super Brother-Man and their town.

He understood the reasoning. They needed to create a buzz that propagated like wildfire since they only had the afternoon for recruitment. The third wave started in three days, and they needed to go back tomorrow to finalize preparations.

Mr. Trang’s plan for this was to create a recruitment stall. They had simply bought out a large stall in a prime location of the square and changed the sign. It now said “SUPER BROTHER-MAN IS RECRUITING! BECOME THE ELITE OF THE WORLD!” in huge lettering, and nothing else. Meanwhile, the old fisherman was sounding like a street hawker as he kept throwing out one bombastic proclamation after another.

Normally, their proclamations might have been met with scorn and maybe even ignored. But the fact that there was a living, breathing Zhix sitting in the stall reading a book seemed to somehow increase the legitimacy of the stall. Who but Super Brother-Man would keep a pet Zhix? The two

government officials looking on the proceedings with troubled faces only furthered the impression.

Still, it had been thirty minutes without anyone coming up to the stall. But clearly a buzz was being created, as a small crowd of onlookers had gathered, and some people seemed to arrive just to look at the excitement. But finally, there was some result from Mr. Trang's tireless efforts.

"You talk a lot, old man, but do you have any proof?" a man shouted from the group of onlookers.

"I understand it is hard to imagine such a great opportunity has presented itself to you. But it is one-hundred-percent real. If you have friends who attended the auction, you should know of Port Atwood already. We spent over twenty million Nexus Coins during the auction, defeating even the Marshall Clan for the battle of precious relics," Sap Trang shouted back.

"Don't forget, Super Brother-Man is not only the strongest man in the world, he is also the wealthiest. And he is ready to spend some of that immense fortune on you, in order to help you advance your noncombat classes."

Some subdued murmurs spread through the crowd. Twenty million Nexus Coins was a crazy amount of money, and most counted their wealth in the hundreds, or perhaps thousands. The low-tiered monsters only gave a handful of Nexus Coins, after all, far less than the more profitable barghest.

Actually, Mr. Trang had initially wanted Zac to stand and swing around his axe and show off his might, but that had summarily been rejected by Zac.

"We stand at the forefront of the world, and we're the only town in the world to hold all four of our new world's species, creating a true metropolis of our new planet," the fisherman continued, seeming to gain vigor the more he boasted.

Zac started to worry about the people's reactions after they arrived at his temporary town filled with demons. From Sap Trang's description, it was as though he offered them a spot in paradise, and not dubious employment on a desolate island.

Still, the effect was limited until suddenly, another shout gathered the crowd's attention.

"It's the Marshall Clan!" a man shouted and pointed to a group walking toward the stall.

"Hehe, I guess their boasting reached the Marshall Clan's ears. I think we're in for a good show," another person muttered, eliciting some chuckles.

Zac looked over, and the shouting man was correct. It was the old man, Henry Marshall, who walked in the front, with the bodyguard from before accompanying him. It looked like Thea hadn't been lying before. They truly hadn't needed Zac's pill, as the bodyguard was walking with no problem, looking as fit as a fiddle. There were also a few more people accompanying the duo, but Zac noted that Thea Marshall herself was not part of the group.

"Mr. Monk, we meet again. Do you mind if we chat a bit?" Henry Marshall said after he reached Zac's stall.

Zac wished that Ogras were here to do the talking, but it looked like he was on his own this time. Then again, it was probably for the best that a human was the one doing the talking with the Marshall patriarch, so Zac nodded and took out another chair from his pouch.

"Is this about Mr. Trang's claims just now?" Zac asked.

"No, that doesn't matter. Port Atwood is currently lacking renown, and the Marshall Clan isn't so frail that we can't provide some assistance on that front," the old man said and gave a nod to one of the men in the group, who quickly left the stall and blended into the group that looked on.

"I am more interested in your plans for the future and wish to offer an alternative to what you heard today," the old man said.

"Oh?" Zac said with piqued interest.

"Truthfully, we had some plans for a network as well, though the government beat us to it. So we have had to find an alternative solution. We have no intention of joining the frail

government alliance, and I have the feeling that neither do you,” Henry continued.

Zac only nodded in response.

“We aim to create a network as well, but it will not be as formalized as the government’s. However, only Lords will be able to join, and the extent will only go as far as providing means of movement and trade. There will be no centralized organizing body and no vassal-superior relationships. How the Lords manage their domains is up to them,” he said.

“What about defense and concentrated war efforts?” Zac asked.

“That would be up to the individual members to organize. The network should only be seen as a means to facilitate various private alliances,” the man answered.

“What’s in it for you to do this?” Zac asked skeptically.

“The government still lives as though we were in the old world, playing bureaucracy. They gather the mediocre, but to what avail? We worry that their narrow-mindedness will steer humanity into a path of no return. We need to provide an alternative, one that’s made for the elite, the powerhouses of the world. We believe that is more in line with how our new reality functions.

“Perhaps the alliance will crumble in the future, with all of us vying for supremacy of our planet. But we need to kick out all foreign scum before we can get to that point,” Henry finished.

“When we first met this morning, you seemed less than pleased by my party’s composition. But now you are inviting us?” Zac asked skeptically.

“My views are that it is only a matter of time before humanity will be pitted against the ilk of your... friend... over there, and the information you provided only proves it,” Henry said as he waved at the Zhix. “We humans haven’t even been able to coexist with ourselves, but suddenly, we are supposed to coexist with two other sentient species?”

The clan leader only shook his head, clearly showing his position. Zac didn't really agree, but he felt no point in arguing.

"Either of us will be proven right in the future, but for now, that's not important for this potential cooperation. Destroying the incursions comes first," Henry finally added.

The two talked for a few more minutes, with Zac mainly asking for some clarifications about the planned alliance, while the old man mainly asked about the information on incursions and the Dominators that Zac had provided the government.

Zac learned there were some planned requirements for the alliance after all. One such requirement was that they would have to keep their teleporters public for a week every now and then, and that they would take turns in doing so. The reason was to attract new blood to the alliance. Zac felt that was reasonable enough, as he was even thinking of making his teleporter permanently public as soon as he had stabilized his position as a Lord.

At the same time, they would be allowed to turn their teleporters private for even the alliance members, but only for a limited time. This was in case there was some internal upheaval or an important mission they didn't want to be interrupted.

Zac gave no definite answer, but he said he would discuss it with the others. Henry Marshall took the tepid answer in stride and nodded as he left the stall.

"Excuse me, Lord Marshall. Is it true?" a voice from the back of the group shouted as the old man planned to leave.

"Is what true?" Henry retorted with a strong voice as he looked over at the crowd, who seemed subdued from the power of his stare.

"Is it really Super Brother-Man's force?" the same voice asked.

At this point, Zac noticed that the one shouting was actually the man who'd diverted from the Marshalls' group

earlier, albeit covered a bit in a hood.

“Yes,” was all Henry Marshall said as he left, but that was all that was needed as the group exploded into commotion.

The looks at the gaudy stall changed from skeptical and derisive to interested and contemplative.

“Why are you recruiting so many people?” someone suddenly shouted from the group, this time not a planted person.

“Port Atwood did not exist prior to the integration. We are building the town completely from scratch. Currently, we have the strongest fighting force of humanity, but we’re lacking in many other departments. We have money but nowhere to spend it. We need driven craftsmen and other noncombat classes to make the town into a truly thriving metropolis,” Mr. Trang answered without missing a beat.

The declaration of having the strongest force also made some waves in the crowd.

“Are you also recruiting warriors?” another man asked.

“Security is currently not a concern for our town, and we are mainly looking for noncombat professions at this point,” Sap answered. “But if you are a stand-out talent or have some unique skills that an army can benefit from, then you’re welcome to apply. But be advised that fighters will not enjoy the same type of freedom as the noncombat classes, as we expect warriors to be in the thick of it fighting. Of course, the benefits we offer our soldiers are also unmatched on planet Earth.”

Sap’s answer made a few people frown, even though he promised high rewards. Zac felt that it was natural. They were in the middle of the New World Government. If any strong warriors around were still unaffiliated, they did not want to be tied down. He wondered a bit what would happen to independent warriors like these people after the government enacted their plan. Would they be booted from the safety of the city?

Suddenly, a woman in her forties walked over to the stall where Zac and Ibtep sat. Since Mr. Trang was busy fielding various questions from the crowd, Zac had to take care of this.

“Can I help you?” Zac asked.

“Is it really true that you welcome all sorts of noncombat classes?” the woman asked with some uncertainty in her eyes.

“Yes. What is your profession?” Zac answered.

“I am an anthropologist,” she answered with hesitation. “I wish to join you and study your society. Are there really four species living together in Port Atwood?”

“Well, the Zhix and Ishiate have their own towns, though that might change in the future for security reasons,” Zac offhandedly answered.

“And there is a fourth species?” she pressed on, seeing that Zac was amenable to answering questions.

“Yes, there’s one of them here in the bazaar somewhere, accompanying our Sky Gnome, who I guess is a fifth species,” Zac answered.

“What are the rules to join? Do I need to sign a System-enforced contract?” she asked.

“No. Your benefits are tied to your contributions to the town. If you contribute nothing, you get nothing,” Zac answered, getting down to brass tacks.

These rules were set with the help of Ogras and Calrin, who explained how heterogeneous forces worked in the Multiverse. Very few actually used contracts, as that was usually seen in bad light. Skilled people in high demand would seldom sign them, apart from for very limited times, such as for the duration of entering a Mystic Realm.

Forces who consisted of all sorts of people, like academies and sects, usually only had contracts for the very top of the organization, those who also had the largest number of benefits. The body of the force generally was kept somewhat honest with the help of contribution systems. Homogenous

forces used contracts mainly for external elders who wanted to become a permanent part of the clan.

Zac had been surprised that contracts were such a small thing until he understood that the number of contracts one could have active was limited. He was already approaching his limit by using it on the whole squad of girls he'd brought back from Greenworth, and there simply was no way for him to have contracts for a whole force.

The only way for him to increase that number was for him to advance in System-sanctioned hierarchy. Bigshots who controlled thousands of planets naturally had a higher cap than a local F-grade warlord.

The Apostate of Order had created the contracts as a way for two people or groups to work together without fear of constant betrayal, not for Lords to enslave their whole population. Therefore, there were also limits on using a branching hierarchy, such as having contracts on a hundred captains who each had contracts on a hundred soldiers. Every contract within the network would be considered directly subservient to Zac, which would count toward his limit.

“But how would you compare my work in anthropology to a blacksmith, for example?” the woman asked skeptically.

“We use Multiverse standard, with an automatic contribution allocator,” Zac answered, drawing interested eyes from both the Zhix and the scientist.





## CRAFTSMEN

“What do you mean?” the anthropologist asked, confused.

“Port Atwood is the only force on Earth that has access to a real Multiverse shop. That has allowed us to gain knowledge of the larger world that is still not publicly available on Earth. For example, most of the New World Government’s intelligence about the incursions is coming from us,” Zac explained. “It also has allowed us to create a structure that is more in line with our new reality.

“Port Atwood will use a standardized contribution system. You can see it as a supercomputer that judges your performance. Your actions will generate contribution points. Working at a pet project for yourself with no application will probably not generate many points, but teaching at our academy will,” he continued.

This was the goal of Zac, though it wasn’t done yet. There were various ways to do this. You could set it up yourself with the help of a few administrator classes and a few specialized arrays, or just buy a contribution management store in the Town Shop. A few golemoid forces similar to the Creators had made a big business of providing various administrative systems and had perfected their algorithms over millions of years.

Contribution management was a very common concept in the Multiverse, as forces were huge, often having millions, even billions in their fold. Making the administration of salaries and benefits automated saved a huge amount of work.

It also saved Lords a lot of money, as people were only paid for contribution rather than time.

There were many more functions to an established contribution system, such as levels. If someone made large contributions over a long time, they would get upgraded to the next tier in the System, giving them better exchange rates and more precious things to trade for.

“What do contribution points do?” the woman asked.

“You trade them for whatever you want, like an internal currency. There is access to cultivation manuals and skills. Gear and weaponry, healing pills, and materials for race evolution are also included. We are stocked with all kinds of things,” Zac answered.

Zac had wondered a bit why not just give Nexus Coins or Crystals, but Ogras explained it in a very simple manner: the lock-in effect. If their recruits got paid in Nexus Coins, they could just leave whenever they wanted. But if they held a lot of their internal currency, people were more likely to stay on.

For the same reason, the rates for expensive things such as manuals or skills were pretty decent. There were permanent skill- and cultivation-crystals in the Multiverse, where anyone could learn the skill imprinted. The lesser versions only worked once, such as the ones containing **[Book of Babel]**.

That meant that Zac could keep stocking up on various skills and cultivation methods as he gained wealth from taxes and other sources. Each new addition would bring a steady stream of revenue to his force, as any time a subject used their points to learn a skill instead of cashing out materials or Nexus Crystals, he would gain pure profit in a sense.

“However, for new people, we will provide a base salary in the form of crystals to help everyone reach level 25 and get their classes. From there, they will have to rely on their own efforts,” he added.

Making his people stronger was part of the reason, the other part being the simple fact that the contribution system

wasn't set up yet. They had the things to offer, but not the framework in place.

“How interesting. Your way of management would make for a good dissertation,” the woman muttered. “What about our freedom? Can we leave whenever we want?”

“The teleporter is currently closed, and if you come with us, you will not be able to leave for at least a month. You should also know that Port Atwood will not be joining the World Government at this point in time, but will stay an independent force,” Zac said, hiding nothing.

The two government officials were listening intently to the whole conversation, but Zac didn't care. In fact, he wanted the information to spread. Who knew, their way of doing things might actually snag some experts from the government to their side. Besides, Sap Trang was shouting out the same information, though using a bit more bombastic wording.

In no time, the whole bazaar and surrounding neighborhoods knew about Port Atwood's recruitment, and that Super Brother-Man was looking for noncombat experts. Still, many were hesitant, even with the Marshall Clan's assurance. Perhaps not about the legitimacy of the force, but whether it would be a good idea to join.

Zac wasn't too surprised about people's reluctance, as New Washington was one of the most thriving cities in the world right now. While the people might not have all the tools to progress in their crafts in the current city, they were at least safe. They didn't know what would await them if they stepped through the teleporter.

Still, one after another surreptitiously stepped forward and asked a few clarifying questions of Zac, who patiently answered them all. There also were a few troublemakers who tried to cause a scene. However, they were quickly and ruthlessly dealt with by Mr. Trang.

Finally, the fisherman met with trouble he was unsure he could actually handle. With a sigh, Zac stood up and walked forward to the group of instigators. He released his aura, causing widespread panic, and with a Heaviness-induced

stomp, created a small crater with his foot, throwing the troublemakers off balance.

After that, there was no more trouble, but at the same time, the onlookers asked their questions of the old fisherman instead, afraid to bother the monster sitting in the stall with closed eyes. Still, Zac was listening intently to the conversation between Mr. Trang and the various people and wordlessly communicated with the old fisherman.

Anyone who Zac felt could be a good asset was asked to gather their belongings and come back as soon as possible. He didn't want to risk the government trying to intercept his talents, so he would have them stay with them at the hotel. For those he could do with or without, he simply said to come to the teleporter at 7 a.m. tomorrow. These were mainly unskilled workers, whom he essentially could gather from the neighboring islands as well.

After a few hours, there were actually over thirty people from various fields who were gathered close to the stand; some even brought their families. Judging by their appearance, some were doing it as a last resort of sorts, as they looked a bit emaciated and haggard. Others were doing it in order to take a chance and improve.

The group consisted of a wide array of people. Apart from the anthropologist, there were all kinds of experts, such as a few engineers, two doctors, a botanist, and even a brewer. Zac almost felt a bit bad for the corpulent man with the handlebar mustache, knowing that he would be hounded by a few hundred thirsty demons as soon as he arrived on the island. Complaints about lack of liquor were one of the most common grievances among the demonkin over the past month, as their own stores had largely run out.

He also managed to snag a few artists and a watchmaker, who were quite surprised their talents were wanted. He didn't actually need painters or a watchmaker, but Zac had a feeling that someone who was adept at working with a craft that demanded steady hands and precision would make a great future inscriber. In fact, anyone he felt might turn into good, or at least passable, inscribers were quickly recruited.

Zac's goal was simple. He wanted to unleash a mountain of inscribed armors created from the wolf pelts and ant carapaces on the surviving humans. His materials were enough to create thousands and thousands of pieces of gear, and with his current demon inscribers, it would take over a decade to complete all the equipment. His desire to get more inscribers only increased after he saw how sought after even mediocre gear was at the auction.

If Calrin also managed to open up a few branches, all the better.

As it was getting late, Sap Trang simply shouted out the meeting spot and rules for any interested parties before they led the group of noncombat classes back to the hotel. By now, the group had grown to over fifty experts plus their families, and the group who had been told to go to the teleporter was five times that number. If all of them actually showed up, it would be quite an improvement for Port Atwood, though Zac expected a decent number of them to get cold feet.

The group took over a few floors of the hotel, racking up a bill that would be insurmountable for most people. Later that night, Calrin and Ogras returned, the gnome having almost a rosy glow. Zac noticed that the gnome had spent a bit more of his money earlier while he was recruiting, but he'd stopped not long after.

"We made a haul this time. It actually seems that the System created a patch of Aetherbloom close to this town, as quite a few sold it. No one has figured out its use yet, so we bought out most of the city's supply. The city's leadership will puke blood when they realize what they've missed out on," the gnome said with glee.

"Aetherbloom? What's that used for?" Zac asked curiously, as he'd never heard of it.

"It's one of the main components for a popular medicinal paste that's used for race improvement. It's more effective than the standard baths, and it even has some effect when trying to improve to D-grade race. A single stalk costs over ten thousand Nexus Coins normally; we paid less than a hundred

coins per stalk,” Calrin explained, almost looking aroused when explaining the gains.

“More importantly, it is quite rare and takes decades for it to regrow, and it probably only existed here due to the System creating some opportunities on this baby planet,” Ogras added with some schadenfreude.

“These bureaucrats lost out on enough materials to bring almost three hundred warriors to E-grade race. For Port Atwood, that could be huge. You saw that many soldiers among the demons still haven’t upgraded their race. These stalks can help us create an elite squad that will shake fear in the world for hundreds of years,” the demon said with a gleam in his eyes.

“The government caught on to our actions after a while though and hurried to buy stalks as well, but not before we snatched a good 80% of what was on the market.”

Zac was quite impressed with their haul, as that sort of paste would be a great thing to add to the future contribution system. It would make the warriors work far harder if they could get that sort of panacea to help them with their evolution.

“We also got quite a few promising people to sign up to join Port Atwood,” Zac said, not wanting to be outdone as he listed the various occupations of their new hires.

As Zac expected, Ogras’ eyes lit up when he heard that there was a brewer on the list, but his next question confused him a bit.

“Are there any filmmakers like directors and editors in the group?” the demon asked.

“No, why?” Zac asked, confused.

“It would be fun to try making my own movie,” he said with a wide smile.

“Eh... I think those kinds of people should be in Hollywood, and I don’t know where that town’s located anymore,” Zac answered hesitantly.

Since there was not much left to do, everyone returned to their quarters, where Zac spent most of the night better acquainting himself with his improved Dao of Heaviness. He also tried to use the experience of improving his first Dao Seed to also make some inroads on his other seeds, though progress was slow there.

After sleeping for two hours, he sat down in the lobby to wait for everyone to gather. Soon most had gathered, though it appeared that a few of the experts had left during the night. Two also backed out before they set out, looking quite embarrassed. Zac assured them it was no trouble, and they quickly left as well, leaving only thirty-eight experts. All in all, it was still a good number who stayed on, in Zac's opinion.

More troubling was the fact that Ogras was not around, and that he'd only left a note at the reception that he'd meet up with the rest at the teleporter. Zac got a headache thinking about what the demon was up to, and he hurriedly gathered the rest of the people before something unexpected cropped up.

The teleporter was decently close to the commercial district, and they opted to walk the twenty-minute promenade rather than trying to get hold of enough cars for the whole party. A few of the more cerebral of the experts were panting when they arrived, and Zac shook his head at their state. The general level of some of the more niche experts was quite low, some even still below level 5.

As they arrived, Zac immediately tried to find the demon, who had promised to be here, but Ogras was nowhere in sight. Zac was starting to get worried that he had gotten into some real trouble, but a voice from the shadows allayed that worry, though a new worry soon replaced it.

"I can't show myself at the moment. Hurry and start the teleporter. We need to leave."





## HOME SWEET HOME

“What have you done?” Zac asked with a sinking feeling while looking at the shadows, drawing confused or concerned glances from the others.

“Aren’t you the curious one? I just solved a few future issues for us, but the government might take some issue with my methods,” the voice responded.

Zac closed his eyes in despair, as he’d seen Ogras’ methods in action before. Something crazy had happened during the night. But he would rather sort it out at his own island than here, so he chose to drop the subject for now.

Not a large distance away, many of the recruits from yesterday stood waiting with large backpacks and trunks of their things in tow. Zac noted with some disappointment that less than half of those who promised to be here actually showed up.

However, he was overall quite content with their haul. Over 150 people had decided to drop their lives here in New Washington to come with him into the unknown, based only on the pull of his own, or Super Brother-Man’s reputation.

Zac walked up to the waiting group, and with a swipe of his hand, put all the luggage into a Cosmos Sack. Next, he walked to the teleporter with everyone in tow, passing right through the security check. It seemed the guards of the teleporter were already informed that his group would be significantly larger when leaving, and simply waved everyone forward.

Zac threw out a small mountain of crystals, enough to let everyone pass through, and opened the channel to Port Atwood.

“I’d better go first, make sure there’s no confusion with the guards.” Ogras’ voice once again sounded, and he appeared, encumbered by a huge box.

Zac’s eyes widened when he realized that said box was not some crate, but rather an elaborate coffin. He planned to close the array, but the demon jumped through without waiting for an answer.

Zac’s bad premonition only got worse, but he swallowed his unease and waved people through one by one. People walked through, some with fear and others with anticipation plastered on their faces. Zac wondered what their faces would be like when they saw that the town was not even built yet.

He did feel a bit bad about the whole situation, but the town would start getting built within the week, so he wouldn’t lose sleep over it, especially considering how safe his island was compared to the rest of the world. He knew people in New Washington might feel safe, but Zac truly doubted that the System would allow them to create a Lord without a proper challenge. Perhaps a true calamity was waiting for New Washington. Besides, he would keep the town’s protective array ready to protect the inner zone from the third monster horde so that no civilians got hurt.

The transfer kept going smoothly until, suddenly, Julia and multiple guards came rushing toward the teleporter. Roughly two-thirds of the recruits had passed through by this time, including the Ishiate and the other original members of the group apart from Zac. He’d been expecting trouble, so he chose to send the most important people through first.

“Stop!” Julia shouted, causing Zac to frown and look over.

“Ignore her. Keep going through,” Zac said as he walked over to intercept the people.

“What’s going on?” Zac asked with a sigh.

“You tell me, Mr. Monk,” one of the guards said angrily. “Witnesses report a shadowy figure abducted Emma MacHale from her high-rise apartment a few hours ago, and your companion, the demon, was spotted carrying a suspicious coffin outside this building earlier.”

Zac already had some suspicions before, but still groaned when he heard the man.

“That’s an odd coincidence. Ogras bought that coffin for a friend who died in the fight against the invaders,” Zac said with a blank face, though he felt his earlobes redden a bit from his shamelessness.

“Why don’t you call him back to New Washington and let us question him?” Julia said with a baleful glare.

Zac was surprised by the reaction, as the government worker looked far angrier this time compared to when he’d wreaked havoc inside their buildings or when he’d killed the leaders of Greenworth.

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible,” Zac refused without hesitation.

He knew Ogras quite well by now. If he had actually put the starlet inside that coffin, then he was long gone from the teleporter by now, and not even Zac would be able to find him unless he wanted to be found.

“You understand your wanton actions are testing your cooperation with the New World Government?” Julia spat out through gritted teeth.

The new citizens of Port Atwood hesitantly looked on, no one currently passing through the portal.

“Wanton actions? You’re throwing baseless accusations against my companion. From what I understand, I just hear some circumstantial evidence, no real proof,” Zac said, not backing down as he turned to the last people waiting to go through. “Keep going. This is just a small matter that I’ll handle.”

The people looked at each other, with two of them shrugging and stepping through. For a few, it actually seemed

the fact that Zac didn't much care about the government was a testament to their strength, and they quickly followed behind into the array. Soon only ten people were left, who hesitantly looked at the teleportation platform.

"This is your last chance to back out," Zac said as he slowly walked toward the array. "I am stepping through in ten seconds. Anyone who hasn't gone through by then will have to stay behind."

"Our talk isn't done yet," Julia shouted from behind.

"Take it up with the chief of police," Zac tersely retorted, not in the mood to keep up the charade any longer.

A few people took deep breaths to steady themselves before they jumped through the array, disappearing into motes of light, while the last six people shook their heads and backed away. Zac only nodded and made to step through the portal.

However, before he could walk into the shimmering light, he saw a form flash by with a mighty leap. It was Julia, who'd jumped with surprising speed into the teleporter. Since she wasn't planning on attacking Zac, his danger sense didn't activate, and he only blankly stared at her form disappearing.

"You should know this already, but Port Atwood is going into seclusion for a month following this. Your colleague's actions will not change this. Ms. Lombard will be returned after that point unless she's committed crimes while in our domain," Zac said to the guards, who looked equally surprised, and stepped through the teleporter.

After the travel time, he once again arrived at the teleportation area and immediately heard a shout.

"Emma! Can you hear me?" Julia's voice carried from outside.

Zac sighed and stepped out to the chaotic scene.

All the new citizens hesitantly looked around, some clearly a bit dismayed at the utter lack of civilization. The array was placed some distance away from the temporary town, and they were surrounded by primordial forests.

“We’ll head to town in just a bit,” Zac said with a loud voice, drawing everyone’s attention.

“You just entered without any invitation,” Zac said as he turned to a dodgy Julia. “You should know you are stuck here now. I can’t let you return to the government at this point.”

“Are you truly trying to fight the World Government?” Julia spat back, clearly still irate.

“Do you speak for the government now? I already told your colleagues that you will have to stay here for now and only be returned if you break no rules.

“Everyone, I’ll lead you to Port Atwood. Please do not stray away in the woods, as all monsters in this area are around level 40,” Zac said.

“You said this area was safe!” a woman shrilly said.

Clearly, some had painted quite a different picture of Port Atwood in their mind compared to the wilderness they found themselves in.

“The beasts are left for our trainees to gain experience. We have already killed everything stronger on the island,” Zac answered.

“Island?” a few asked simultaneously, and even Julia refocused on Zac.

“Port Atwood is an island kingdom. Honestly, we still haven’t found the mainland, so we are not exactly sure where we are in relation to places like New Washington. This is the main island, while we control a few more. We are constantly traveling through our archipelago to save any stranded citizens and claim more land,” Zac explained.

“The Cosmic Energy! It’s so dense!” a man suddenly exclaimed.

It was one of the experts who actually had a passable level. He was a doctor who was also a cultivator and was already at level 19, which was respectable for someone who hadn’t really fought any monsters since returning from the Tutorial.

“This whole island has far higher amounts of energy compared to the mainland. Those who contribute to Port Atwood will be given access to areas that have up to a few times higher density than even this. It is no luck that we became the strongest force on the planet. Anything that is done here, from cultivation to farming, has twice the effect from half the effort,” Zac said, which improved the somewhat despondent faces of some of the people.

He hadn't planned on talking this much, but the faces of the new citizens clearly showed that some were on the verge of a breakdown, clearly regretting their choice. He needed to throw out some good news, or they would never get back to town. Julia looked down at the ground with a thoughtful face, which gave Zac some pause. He still hadn't figured out what to do with her, as she was a high-ranking official.

He already knew that there likely was one or a few spies in the group, but he knew there was not much he could do about it apart from isolating the town until his position was unshakable. He guessed he would just let Julia wander around for now unless she actively tried to look into the restricted areas. Perhaps he'd add a guard or two to her.

His musings were interrupted, as there suddenly were twenty people who approached. Zac saw it was a few of the people from his female squad, who after just a few days of training looked quite a bit more professional and powerful.

“Welcome back,” Joanna, who led the squad, said.

Zac only nodded and then pointed at Julia after throwing Joanna the Cosmos Sack containing the bags of the new citizens.

“This one isn't really a part of the group. You should remember her; she's a high position official of the New World Government who suddenly jumped through the teleporter. Just let her go with the others, but keep an eye on her. She's level 29; can you handle it?” Zac asked Joanna.

The recruits balefully glared at Julia when they heard she was a government employee. Their experiences in Greenworth

were clearly still fresh in their minds, and they held a deeply rooted hatred for the government due to the mayor.

“Not a problem,” Joanna said, looking like she wanted to eat the government employee whole.

“Don’t kill or torture her,” Zac only said with a sigh. “As for the others, give them the same type of introduction as all the other new townspeople.”

As he gave over the responsibility of the new citizens to Joanna, he felt like a large burden was lifted from his shoulders as he started to walk away.

“Why is he leaving?” a voice was heard from the group.

“Do you think the strongest man in the world has time to babysit you?” one of the Valkyries shot back, causing some murmurs among the group.

Zac shot a glance back toward the group, only to see Julia intently staring at him.

“If Ogras truly did kidnap the movie star, you don’t need to worry. He is simply a movie fanatic and doesn’t have any nefarious purposes. But I will look for him now and investigate,” he said before he disappeared into the woods.

It didn’t take long for him to walk back to his mansion, and he felt the tranquility soothe his soul. However, that tranquility didn’t last long, as a shrill voice interrupted it.

“Are you crazy? A coffin? How can you do this to me?”

Zac recognized the voice, and with a sigh, he walked over to the garden he’d heard the sound come from. As he approached, he saw Emily staring with large starstruck eyes at the scene inside.

“Wow, it’s really her!” Emily whispered with an excitable voice as she saw Zac approach.

Zac nodded before he turned to the couple in the distance. When he saw the scene, a small smile spread across his face.

It looked like the demon had miscalculated some things.





## ROADS TO LORDSHIP

In the middle of the secluded garden, Ogras was grinning as he deftly dodged an enraged Emma MacHale, who was currently trying to clobber him with a champagne bottle.

“A coffin? A COFFIN? What kind of asshole moves someone in something so ominous as a coffin? That wasn’t what we agreed upon! I’ll shove this bottle up your ass,” she screamed as she threw the bottle with full force at a laughing Ogras.

“I didn’t want you to feel uncomfortable, and the casket was nicely padded inside. I am a gentleman, after all,” Ogras said with a smile as he snatched the bottle out of the air, careful not to let it break.

Zac was quite surprised at Emma’s personality. It seemed the person he’d seen in interviews and on the stage of the auction was another role she played, just like in the movies. Her real personality was far more coarse.

He was also quite relieved that it seemed that what Ogras did was not an abduction, though the exact details hadn’t been quite agreed upon. Zac didn’t want to have a falling-out with the demon, but if Ogras truly had started kidnapping women, he would have no choice but to do something drastic, as he couldn’t accept such behavior. It would be on a completely different scale compared to just messing around at the auction.

Emily giggled as she heard the exchange, which made the movie star look their way, immediately focusing on Zac.

“You! You let this horned mongrel just knock me out and carry me around in that goddamn casket? What? Why are you just standing there gaping, you pervert? Are you the kind of guy who just finishes by himself in the corner?”

“Urh,” Zac only managed to get out, not ready to become the target of Emma’s vitriol. “I only found out Ogras had, uh, brought you here, after Julia Lombard told me.”

“Jules told you? Where is she?” the starlet said, quickly calming down.

“Do you two know each other? She was quite angry. Angry enough to jump through the teleporter to come here,” Zac couldn’t help asking.

“She did?” she asked, her mouth slightly curving upward before refocusing at the demon. “You can’t hurt her, or I won’t cooperate anymore. And you never told me you lived in the goddamn jungle.”

“Hi! I’m Emily. I’m a huuge fan! You’re in Port Atwood. It’s an island in the middle of nowhere!” Emily chimed in, clearly excited to meet a movie star.

“Hi, pretty,” Emma said, clearly more amenable to the excited teenager. “You should stay away from those two. Something is wrong with their heads.”

Emily only giggled in response.

“Emily, tell Emma a bit about Port Atwood. Ogras, come with me,” Zac said with a sigh.

He needed to understand what the hell was going on. Soon the two stood some distance away while Emily peppered the movie star with questions about her old life, and Emma had turned back into the gentle personality you saw on TV back in the day.

“So you created a huge mess. You were seen with that casket before you came back here. And now we’ve got a government official on the island,” Zac said with an angry glare. “I don’t even want to imagine the kind of riot you’ve caused in New Washington. You’d better have a goddamn good reason for all this.”

“Well, the casket was sort of a spur-of-the-moment thing.” Ogras shrugged, drawing another baleful glare from Zac.

“I was only planning on visiting Ms. MacHale for the dinner I promised, but things turned out this way.”

“She’s not a prisoner. And no forcing her to do anything,” Zac said with an even stare.

“Bah, why would I do something like that? The chase is half the fun,” Ogras spat back. “Besides, that’s not why I brought her here.”

“Explain,” Zac said, still annoyed.

“Didn’t you say you couldn’t understand how those useless bureaucrats are creating a Lord while you, the top spot on your Ladder, are fighting tooth and nail for the same privilege? Well, Emma MacHale solved that puzzle for me yesterday,” Ogras began.

“The first clue came from Ricky, the poor sap you left with me. I asked him about the government’s plans after he spilled everything about their group. We missed one of them, by the way, so watch your back. The Red Mercenaries have done some nasty work for the government before, it seems, even killed a Ranker who actively spoke against the New World Government.”

Zac didn’t much care about the last man who was still alive, but he was more concerned about the fact that the Red Mercenaries did government wetwork.

“So the government was behind the attack?” Zac asked with a frown.

“No, it seems they truly only did it to stuff their pockets a bit. Birds die for food; men die for money,” the demon answered with a shrug.

“I was more interested about what he told me about the government’s quests. He swore that there were no quests like defending New Washington from beasts to become a Lord. He did, however, mention that he had heard about a contribution Crystal, and that Emma MacHale was quite high on it.”

Zac was quite intrigued, completely having forgotten about the fact that a storm might be brewing in New Washington by now. He only nodded for the demon to continue the narration.

“While I was walking through the bazaar, I was listening for any gossip, and it turned out that MacHale wasn’t the only star the government employed. There were actually many of them visiting various towns, shaking hands and kissing babies, so to speak. All while promoting the government.

“At first, I thought it was just promotion to gain legitimacy before the auction and get more to sign up for their little alliance. But I was proven wrong. I found out where MacHale was staying later on and went to visit her. Partly to find out more and partly, uh, for personal interests,” Ogras said, drawing an eye roll from Zac.

“I invited myself into her domicile, and after she had calmed down a bit, we had a nice talk. I found out a lot of interesting things. Such as why they held their auction, and why there were stars travelling town to town with government escorts. The government needs the *fame*,” Ogras said with a grin.

“What?” Zac blurted.

“It’s their Lord quest. They need to generate enough renown, and someone among them will be promoted to a Lord. They are using the stars as mouthpieces to spread the plans of the government and improve their renown. The auction was partly held to gather a lot of forces and gain a lot of renown in one fell swoop. Those who improve the fame of the government would get contribution points, and Emma was one of those,” Ogras said.

“That still doesn’t explain why you kidnapped her,” Zac said.

“She asked me to,” Ogras said with a shrug. “When I told her who you were, she immediately requested sanctuary. In the beginning, she was doing the work willingly, but after she learned some things, she wanted out. However, they wouldn’t allow her to leave. The government was essentially keeping

her a captive to generate fame since she was one of their top earners.”

“Does it even matter if you snatched her? They still have the same amount of fame as before, even though she isn’t there anymore.”

“Well, according to Emma, the fame is attached to those who contributed somehow. I don’t truly understand it, since I’ve never heard of a quest like this before,” Ogras said with some hesitation. “But if those people defected or died, then the government would lose progress on their quest.”

Zac suddenly remembered the demon’s words outside the teleportation building in New Washington and got a bad feeling.

“You didn’t...?” Zac said with a sinking feeling.

“Well, a few people in New Washington had untimely deaths during the night. But that was also a request from Ms. MacHale. She is quite ruthless. Though we only killed a few degenerates who used their status for disgusting things,” Ogras said with a sinister glint in his eyes.

“You know this might set me on a straight collision course with the government?” Zac said angrily.

Zac wondered if he would ever be able to return to New Washington or their alliance towns without a cover. If the government made Zac an accomplice for what seemed to be a murder spree and a kidnapping, there was no knowing what they might do. Perhaps his good name was being dragged through the mud as they spoke.

“You already were. Someone like you can’t coexist with a group like that. Better prepare yourself mentally and clear this wave quickly. They might be gunning for your sister as we speak,” Ogras retorted.

Zac thoughtfully frowned in response, knowing that the demon might be right on the nose with that remark. The government wanted to create a unified power, and people like himself might be considered a thorn in their side, even though Zac had no designs on their alliance. Perhaps they would have

found some other excuse to create trouble for him, even if Ogras hadn't gone berserk in the town.

"You still haven't properly explained why you went through all this trouble?"

"For my, uh, our interests, of course," Ogras said. "The auction brought far more fame than the government expected, and they were extremely close to finishing their quest. It was to the point that they would probably achieve it before you. We couldn't allow that to happen. Becoming the first Lord of a world should bring great benefits to that Lord's town and the Lord himself."

"So you did that all for me, you say?" Zac asked skeptically.

"Remember, our fates are tied together on this little island," Ogras said. "Your prosperity is my prosperity."

Zac went over the information for some time. He wasn't really comfortable with the fact that the demon had gone off on a murder spree in a human town without saying anything. What he said was true, their fates were tied together, and Ogras' actions would impact Zac.

At the same time, he had to admit he felt it was for the best. The government's actions sounded quite shady, and more importantly, he didn't want to cede the advantage of being the first Lord. He'd gotten the Creators' shipyard from being the first to close an incursion, so he felt that becoming the first Lord might give a huge advantage as well.

"In the future, consult me first about stuff like this. If we're going to have a working cooperation, you can't go rogue at every turn. That doesn't only go for your nightly activities, but also your actions in the auction," Zac said with an even stare.

"Yes, Mother," Ogras said while rolling his eyes. "Well, you did show passable ruthlessness with the poison, so I guess I won't need to take all matters into my own hands in the future. But don't go squeamish on me. Remember, your actions don't only impact yourself, but all your subjects and

your family. A moment of softness can lead to a lifetime of suffering.”

“Okay, okay. Also, the government official is your responsibility. She came here because of your actions, so you solve the aftermath. Find out if she is part of this all, but don’t kill her,” Zac said.

Overall, he had a pretty decent impression of Julia, but if she’d jumped through the portal to control the government’s asset, then she would likely become a problem.

“All these rules,” Ogras said with a roll of his eyes, though Zac knew he acknowledged the request.

“I told you, you can’t hurt Jules,” Emma suddenly said, having snuck up on them. “If you do, I’ll start preaching again here, giving the government a large boost in reputation.”

“I told you, as long as she doesn’t start breaking the rules, she’ll be fine,” Zac said.

“Good. Now tell me, where will I stay? The demon promised me a mansion.”





## COGSTOWN

Zac's headache was only growing as he walked the movie star to one of the empty courtyards on his compound. He had been forced to let Emma stay here until the promised mansion was built, and he had decided that the construction would be fast-tracked.

Ogras had wanted to accompany them, but Alea arrived, which seemed to make him change his mind. The poison mistress didn't have her usual playfulness, and she simply left after she had thrown a glare at the movie star, which was returned in kind. For now, only Emily was accompanying them.

"So you really are Super Brother-Man? Jules told me she suspected that you were him, and the demon confirmed it. Why do you have that stupid nickname? Sounds like the alias of someone trying to lure kids into their van," Emma said, obviously not caring to choose her words more carefully after learning who Zac was.

Zac only sighed and shook his head. It seemed that him being the top Ranker couldn't subdue the mouth of the renowned movie star completely. Still, it was thanks to her that he could still attain the first Lord title and benefits, so he chose to simply endure it for now.

At least she would be someone else's problem soon enough, as she'd be barred from his compound the moment she got her mansion built. And if she kept making a racket or caused problems in Port Atwood, he wasn't above throwing

her in jail, even if he had to build one just for her. There were limits to his patience.

“You can stay here for now,” Zac said after they arrived at a small but exquisite courtyard that just so happened to be on the opposite side of the compound from where Zac usually meditated. “It might be a week or two before we can construct your permanent home, as our force is a bit occupied with a few things right now.”

“Well, it’s passable, I suppose,” Emma said as she walked around.

Zac nodded and turned to leave, but a shout stopped him.

“Wait. What about me?” Emma said with a glare.

“What about you?” Zac asked.

“Will you just leave me here? What am I supposed to do? You’re the worst host ever,” Emma said with a huff.

“Emily can take you to Port Atwood. Julia should be there somewhere also. You’re also free to stay with Ogras in his palace,” Zac said, hoping she would take him up on his offer.

“Why in god’s name would I live with that bastard? Cutie, take me to Julia, please,” she said and hooked her arm in Emily’s to her visible excitement.

Finally, the two left together, leaving Zac alone with his thoughts. He opened his quest screen and took a look at his quest.

**Incursion Master (Unique): Close or conquer incursion and protect town from denizens of other alignments for 3 months. Reward: 5 E-grade Nexus Crystals, town upgraded to City, status upgraded to Lord. (2/3) [02:15:23:14]**

Less than three days remained until the third and final wave. He went over his things and felt as prepared as he could be. He already had two of the Lightning Punishment arrays that he’d bought for the ant waves, and an ample number of crystals he’d gotten from Rydel’s Cosmos Sack and the mining operations.

He also had the high-quality siege machines from the sack, which even low-leveled people could utilize. They might not gain energy from the kills, but at least they would contribute to the war efforts. Depending on the nature of the waves, he would either have the Valkyries use the siege engines or gain experience from fighting by hand. He honestly did not know what else there was to do before the wave hit, apart from preparing the general population.

After resting a bit, he went to the town to meet up with Adran, who usually was up to date with everything happening.

“Greetings, Lord Zac,” the demon said as Zac entered his office, which was still the large tent. He still hadn’t bothered with having a proper structure built, as it would be moved shortly in any case.

“How did it go with the new townspeople?” Zac asked after greeting the administrator.

“Hehe, I do not know what you told them to get them to come here, but some were... less than pleased with the current state of Port Atwood. Though it got better when we demonstrated building a house in an hour, and explained we would begin construction of the town proper within two weeks,” the demon said.

Zac only grimaced while nodding. He wasn’t too surprised by their reactions after Mr. Trang’s shameless recruitment tactics.

“There are also the two beastkin who have kept pestering us to take them to the island with the town of their kind,” he added.

“Where are they now?” Zac asked.

The incident with Ogras had made him completely forget about the two.

“They are waiting in the tavern,” the demon answered.

“We have a tavern?” Zac asked, surprised.

“Yes, one of the more enterprising humans opened one up while you were gone. Another human also informed us of his

island having a pretty huge cache of liquor. We made an extra excursion there to procure it. I hope you don't mind." The demon grinned.

"That's fine. It's good that some civilian businesses are cropping up. Please help out cases like that in the future as well," Zac said with a nod. "How are the war preparations?"

"Everything we can think of has been done. We have massively improved on the traps and pitfalls outside the walls, reinforced the walls themselves, and added the siege machines," the administrator said.

"We have also trained some of the more competent civilians to help out with logistical efforts and basic triage. The only thing remaining is whether you wish to buy any more arrays or tools to prepare."

Zac mulled it over. Between his combination town protection array and his lightning punishments, he felt secure enough to tackle the third wave. He was sure it would be a nasty one, but still there were limits to how far the System could crank up the difficulty. With his own and the demons' power, and the various advantages he had accumulated, he felt confident in taking on almost anything the System could throw at him.

"We have everything we need saved from the ant horde," Zac said, and the demon nodded in agreement.

"Oh, we have also started making some inroads in making the carriages you brought back some time ago run on Nexus Crystals. For now, we can simply create fire from the energy in the combustion chambers of the contraption, but in the future, we might be able to even make it run on pure energy instead of wasting so much of it through converting it to heat," the demon added.

Zac was delighted at the news. That kind of refitting would be quite profitable, he believed, but also it would help with mobility for a lot of people. Not every town could own an expensive teleportation array and would have to actually travel between towns by foot. Being able to drive would massively increase their chance of survival.

“Great, keep me posted. I am planning on visiting the beastman village before the wave hits. Perhaps we can get some more warriors. From my impression of these Ishiate, they might also be skilled craftsmen, which would help in refining all our materials into sellable equipment.”

With that, he left the command tent to head over to the tavern. He saw the two Ishiate sitting in a corner, looking somewhat troubled, but when Zac told them he was taking them to their hometown, they were visibly excited.

But before they could leave, he started as he saw who stood behind the counter.

“It’s you?” Zac asked with some surprise.

“Well, a man’s got to do something,” Ryan answered with a grin. “When I said I wanted to open a saloon, the demons were more than willing to help with the construction. I’ve never seen a house get erected that fast. Unfortunately, I can’t really charge the demons for liquor since they brought it, but at least I can charge the others.”

“I’m glad you found your calling,” Zac answered with a small smile.

“Yeah, you know, I sometimes dreamed of moving to some tropical country and opening a beach bar back when I worked a dead-end job. Who knew that the apocalypse would turn it into reality?” Ryan answered with a widening smile.

Zac wouldn’t have minded staying a bit, but the anxious Ishiate made him remember his tasks.

“I will talk to you later,” Zac said as he left with the two beastmen in tow.

Zac also brought the fisherman and one of the demons who participated in the original scouting mission and immediately set sail. The island was over six hours away, and he didn’t want to waste any time. Soon they were cutting through the waves at breakneck speed as Zac once again sat in the fore, contemplating the Dao.

The two Ishiate were extremely intrigued about the vessel they used. They likely had studied human technology quite a

bit since the integration, but this vessel was something else entirely. They kept excitedly talking about the construction and tried to hypothesize how it worked as they furiously scribbled notes in notepads. It was as though the vessel had opened up a new world to them.

Zac was happy to see their excitement, as he had hopes that he would be able to relocate at least part of the Ishiate back to his town in order to gain some craftsmen. The humans he'd brought from New Washington were a good start, but Earth had had very few proper craftsmen before the fall. Zac suspected that things like blacksmiths, tinkerers, and even alchemists were more common concepts among the Ishiate, who were essentially a medieval society hungering for technological advancements.

Finally, as the suns started to set, they arrived at their destination, a decently sized island that was slightly larger than the ones he'd visited so far. The climate was the same as on his island, but the forests looked quite different. They were far more colorful, with many trees having red leaves instead of green, and many trunks were blueish.

The town they were visiting wasn't originally a seaside town, so it was some ways inland, and they started traveling through the beautiful forest. A weird small critter with three eyes and six legs suddenly skittered in front of them, startling Zac.

"It's a prikka," one of the Ishiate explained. "I haven't seen one since the fall. This whole forest feels like home, though it has grown quite a bit from what's normal."

After an uneventful trek of five minutes, they arrived at the walled city, and Zac studied it with some interest. Its architecture looked quite different from anything he'd seen so far.

The wall was made of some metal, and on top of it, there were huge brass cannons mounted. Both the cannons and the walls looked somewhat new, even though they weren't in great shape. Zac assumed they had been erected or improved in order to combat the monsters of the island. That would also

explain the craters on the ground around the wall, and the fire-licked trees at the edge of the forest.

“We’re home,” the female Ishiate said with ripe emotion in her voice.

As they approached the town, Zac kept looking over the area. It was clear that the town hadn’t been unscathed over the past months. There were clear signs of battle all around the town, and the metal plating was dented or even missing in various spots. It gave a battle-torn image, though Zac noted that the town still stood, as no parts of the wall were completely ruined, and there were figures patrolling its wall walk.

The group made no effort to hide and openly walked toward the main gate. Their approach was quickly noted, and the guards shouted down at someone below. Soon they arrived at the gate, which still was closed.

“Hello? I’m Shea Moon of Cogstown, daughter of Basso Moon. With me are my husband, Porro Moon, and some human friends who helped us return home,” she shouted up at the wall.

There was no response for a minute, and Zac started to frown.

“What now?” Zac asked the Ishiate, who also looked a bit confused.

“Wait a bit longer. The guards may be reporting to those in charge,” Shea answered hesitantly.

She was quickly proven right, as after another minute, a roar could be heard over the wall.

“Open the goddamn gate, you idiots!” a deep voice resonated, almost immediately followed by the gates slowly opening with a creak.

Zac and the others didn’t have time to enter before a giant Ishiate rushed at them.





## REINFORCEMENTS

“Little Shea!” the man shouted, tears pouring from his eyes as he scooped up the female Ishiate in a bear hug. “We were so worried when you and the others disappeared. The world turned crazy, and we found our town moved to this island. We feared the worst.”

“I missed you, Father!” Shea answered with a sob.

“What’s going on? What happened?” the huge man asked with concern. “And just what are those hairless ones? The old one looks a bit similar to the ones we have here.”

“You have humans in Cogstown?” Zac couldn’t help asking, which gave the huge man a start.

“You speak our language?”

“He has a skill for that,” Shea explained. “This is Zac Atwood. He is the leader of a town called Port Atwood on a neighboring island. Mr. Atwood, this is Basso Moon. He is the leader of Cogstown and its chief engineer.”

“How did you two end up on a neighboring island? Are the others still there?” Basso asked after nodding at Zac.

“It’s a long story. I’ll explain as we go.”

Basso nodded and led them inside the town. Zac curiously looked around as they walked, content to let Shea give her father the standard rundown of the System and the Tutorial. It quickly became apparent that Cogstown wasn’t a spot where cultivators had been dropped off after the month was over.

When the beastman mentioned humans, Zac's heartbeat had sped up for a moment, hoping that Hannah and the others had been dropped off here. But the Ishiate were clueless about most things regarding the System, completely dashing that hope.

The town looked well fortified from the outside, but it was clear that they had met some trouble. A lot of houses were crumbled, and there were gashes and splotches of blood at many places. Even Shea couldn't help herself from asking what was going on, eliciting a sigh from Basso.

"It's the goddamn birds. There's a flock of large white birds who turned crazy a month ago. Before that, they mainly stayed close to the sea and fed on fish or small critters. But as they grew larger, so did their appetites. They started attacking our town, actually snatching people up in the air," he said with a tired voice.

"We kept shooting them, both with skills and our weaponry. But they are so large by now that if we kill them in the air, their corpses become dangerous projectiles that might kill people when they smash into the ground. And no matter how many we kill, it seems they are endless."

"Can you buy a defensive array?" Zac asked, drawing a pained glance from the town leader.

"That's the problem. We do have the crystal Shea mentioned, but we can't buy much more than a shop and a few basic structures, such as a smithy manned by those weird automatons. We got those options after defending the town from a series of monster attacks.

"I see that the fortifications you mentioned exist, but we can't purchase them. It seems we need to unlock them with another quest, but we haven't even received a quest yet."

Zac nodded, not feeling too surprised. There were very few who actually had the option to buy the arrays at the moment, it seemed. Otherwise, quite a few more would have been able to get teleporters, far more than the fifty or so towns in the whole world who appeared to possess them at the moment.

Zac was about to ask a follow-up question but was interrupted by some commotion.

“Grandpa!” an Asian man in his early twenties shouted as he rushed toward their group.

“Little Tuan? Is that you?” the old fisherman shouted back with a shaky voice, his eyes immediately reddening.

Mr. Trang had already mentioned earlier that the younger generation had left on a boat to find help for their grandparents. Unfortunately, they hadn’t heard from them since. It looked like at least one of them had somehow ended up on this island, and was one of the “hairless ones” that Basso had mentioned.

The man rushed up to the old fisherman, followed by a few more Vietnamese youths who looked to be between twenty and thirty-five. Zac was relieved to see that they seemed fed and unharmed, meaning they probably weren’t prisoners. He really wanted to recruit some Ishiate for his town, but if they had mistreated Sap and the others’ grandchildren, it would have become a thorny situation.

“Why are you kids here?” Mr. Nguyen asked as he looked over his villagers.

“Our ship was attacked by some monstrous fish while we looked for the mainland, and we steered toward this island before the ship sank... Giang and Phuc didn’t make it,” Tuan answered with a shame-filled face. “We were worried sick, but these aliens wouldn’t help build a ship, since it was too dangerous.”

“It’s good that you stayed here rather than going back for us old folks. We left ourselves by ship and now live in Lord Zac’s town. We’re doing quite well, and old man Trang is already level 28. And this old man is almost ready to get a class as well,” he said with a wide smile.

“I’m glad you’re all okay. Why don’t you stay here? I’m sure these aliens won’t mind. They are pretty nice, though it’s a bit hard to make yourself understood,” one of the other youngsters said.

“No, it’s better you kids come back with me and Lord Zac after we’re done here,” Mr. Nguyen answered with a shake of his head. “It seems a bit dangerous here, while Port Atwood is completely safe.”

Since Mr. Nguyen was one of the main naval scouts, he’d been given a skill crystal for the **[Book of Babel]**, so Basso and the other Ishiate could understand his words as well.

“It’s pretty big words to claim complete safety in this new world of ours,” an Ishiate with a large blunderbuss on his back responded skeptically.

“I think Mr. Nguyen is simply referring to the fact that we have eradicated any threatening beasts on our island, so we do not have to worry about such things anymore. However, with the incursions and other threats humans and Ishiate are facing, it can’t be called completely safe,” Zac answered.

The Vietnamese people looked on with surprised expressions, seeing how the Ishiate seemed to understand their words and respond. Clearly, they still didn’t know about the language skill.

“Other threats?” Basso said with a frown.

“Do you have somewhere we can talk in private?” Zac asked.

Soon they found themselves in a large meeting room in what seemed part castle part hangar. From the looks of it, they were either trying to build or actually had built a zeppelin, though he couldn’t see one of them floating around.

A few other leaders of Cogstown had joined Basso and his guards, and they listened as Shea explained her experiences and findings in the Tutorial and since then. The Vietnamese people were also in the room, and the old fisherman was quietly translating for them in a corner.

When some clarification was needed by Zac, he provided it, but otherwise, he was content to let the Ishiate talk.

“I heard Mr. Zac mention our flag at the meeting, and we immediately chose to follow him. That’s how we got home.” Shea finished recounting her and the other cultivators’

experiences. It appeared she and the other cultivators of Cogstown had been dropped off at the other side of the planet, and Shea had been at the auction since she had acquired the language skill during the Tutorial.

“It is a relief to hear that so many of our people are still alive and amongst kin. It is a shame we can’t connect with them, though,” Basso said with a sigh as he looked at Zac. “And I am thankful to you, Mr. Zac, for bringing my daughter home.”

“It was no problem. I was planning on visiting here sooner or later in any case,” Zac said.

“Oh?” Basso said, and the other Ishiate looked curiously or warily at Zac.

“In a sense, we’re neighbors here on our islands, and I believe it’s important to know each other,” Zac said. “I’d also like to extend an invitation to the citizens of Cogstown. During the past months, we have traveled across the archipelago to rescue any people stranded and beset by monsters.”

Finally, Zac had found an opportunity for recruitment and wouldn’t miss it.

“Port Atwood is in need of skilled craftsmen. After talking with Shea, I’ve come to the understanding that your kind are both creative and skilled workers. Many of your group have switched from trying to improve your technology to becoming craftsmen classes with great success. If you’re willing to relocate to my island, you would be most welcome,” he continued.

“Why would we want to move and become a human’s subordinates?” an Ishiate asked, drawing a nervous glance from Shea.

“Security and improvement. Suffice to say, Port Atwood is somewhat unique on the whole planet. We have access to knowledge that you can’t find anywhere else. Much of the information about the incursions and Dominators Shea mentioned earlier comes from us. We also possess abundant resources to improve your crafting, and the Cosmic Energy

density on our island is unparalleled,” Zac answered without missing a beat. “Most importantly, our citizens are safe and therefore able to focus on their personal improvement.”

“Our people have lived here for generations, and what you propose is a huge change. If you please would excuse us for a bit while we discuss things,” Basso said politely.

Zac understood that there likely were things they wanted to ask Shea and her husband without the prying ears of himself and his team, so he nodded at the old fisherman and the demon guards and left with them.

Mr. Nguyen’s grandson and the others followed as well, and soon they found themselves on a group of sofas in another room.

“Hey, how did you get the skill to be able to talk in all languages?” Tuan asked Zac. “It seems really convenient.”

“Brat, be polite to Lord Zac,” the old fisherman said with a glare as he smacked his grandson in the back of his head.

“Ow! Grandpa, why do you keep calling him a lord? Is he a European nobility? That shouldn’t matter anymore,” Tuan said, looking a bit indignant.

“What European? He’s a Ranker on the Ladder,” the old man explained. “Act properly. It’s thanks to Lord Zac we old folk can survive. Work hard and you can gain opportunities that the rest of the world could only dream of. We might not have come from great origins before the world changed, but that doesn’t matter anymore.”

“What? What’s going on?” Tuan asked, while the others looked visibly confused.

Zac scratched his chin, feeling a bit embarrassed as he understood everything they said, even if they spoke in Vietnamese. He understood the old man was still following the rules that he’d put in place earlier, stopping him from saying anything about Port Atwood. Still, the old man wanted to convey the importance of having a good rapport with Zac.

But things had changed since he gave that order, and hiding nothing, he simply stated the truth. “I’m Super Brother-

Man.”

It took some convincing, but soon the Vietnamese youth no longer thought it odd that their elder looked up to some foreigner who was so much younger than him, and they no longer spoke about living in the Ishiate town. Clearly staying with the force of the top Ranker seemed a far more reasonable idea, especially since the other elders were still staying in Port Atwood.

It took almost an hour before Shea and Basso joined Zac, though the Ishiate were good hosts and brought some food and drink while they waited. Something about his demeanor had clearly changed, and he warily looked at Zac, who was calmly sitting in his seat. The large Ishiate looked troubled as he sat down on one of the free sofas on the opposite side of Zac.

“I am sorry about the wait, Lord Zac. There has been much to go over. The news my daughter has brought regarding the change in the world is troubling, to say the least. We knew something extraordinary was happening, but the reality has far exceeded our expectations,” Basso said, looking quite worn out.

“We understand where you’re coming from, and perhaps moving Cogstown to your future residential and commercial districts is the best for our futures. However, I cannot make such a decision on the spot. We have lived our whole lives in this town, and we cannot leave it just like that.

“Our wilder brethren think us uncaring about the past, but that is wrong. We constantly build on our ancestors’ efforts to improve life for future generations. Cogstown is the result of four generations of Ishiate who have pushed themselves to unravel the universe.”

While Zac didn’t share the same types of feeling about his own hometown, Greenworth, he could understand where he was coming from.

“I will not force anyone to do something they are not willing to do. But you should make a decision sooner rather than later, as your problems with the birds might only get



worse. Normally, we would help, but we will have our hands full ourselves in the coming days,” Zac answered.

“We will leave soon, and it will be roughly ten days to two weeks before we can visit again, and that’s the soonest I can imagine,” Zac continued.

“We understand your force will face some sort of trial soon, though Shea didn’t learn the details. If you’re amenable, I would like to send a few of our tinkers back with you. They are the ones who built the cannons on our walls, and perhaps might prove useful in your war efforts. Truthfully, they will also scout your force and island to see whether it would be a good idea for us to move or not,” Basso answered.

“That’s fine,” Zac said, not feeling surprised.

He hadn’t expected the isolated Ishiate to uproot themselves on his or Shea’s word, and that he got this much response from Cogstown was better than expected. The tinkers might even be useful in the coming wave.

Basso and Zac kept talking for a while, and Zac even promised to sell an exploratory vessel like the one he used for a whopping five million Nexus Coins. The money-printing machine that was the Creators’ shipyard was finally starting to give returns.

He’d long ago explained the situation to the Creators, so the ships themselves apparently were modeled after vessels from a huge human force called the Allbright Empire that spanned multiple galaxies. Any foreigner seeing the ships would think they were made by some grandmaster engineer from that empire.

Only an hour later, Zac sat down again on the fore of the ship and, with closed eyes, ignored the hubbub on the cramped vessel behind him.



## THE THIRD WAVE

Zac had a sense of déjà vu as he stood waiting on the wall, somberly looking toward the inner regions of the island. Next to him stood Ogras and his three generals. Zac had been extremely surprised to hear that Namys was dead, worried that some monster or powerhouse had arrived at the island.

He was even more shocked to learn that she had been killed by Alea on Ogras' orders. Zac immediately called an emergency meeting between the three of them, and it took an hour to finally get to the bottom of things. Ogras was almost biologically incapable of delivering clear answers, whereas Alea refused to divulge anything Ogras hadn't.

To hear that the sour-looking demoness had far-gone plans to kill him in his sleep without him even having an inkling of it caused Zac a fretful sleepless night. He knew Namys wasn't one of his biggest fans but had no idea that it went to the level of wanting to eradicate him. Zac understood Ogras' actions, and Zac also felt it showed that Ogras was in it for the long haul, but it also meant that they had lost one of the best fighters and leaders for the third wave.

Ogras looked unusually pissed off as he was chewing on a piece of dried meat next to him, which was out of character for him. The demon usually donned that annoying grin no matter the situation, so seeing him trying to take out his anger on a piece of dried boar was a bit funny.

“What's with you? Your courtship not going according to plan?” Zac asked as he glanced over.

The demon snarled and threw the piece of food at the wall, telling Zac he'd hit the bull's-eye.

“Did you know?” Ogras asked as he angrily looked at Zac. “The brat did at least.”

“Know what?” Zac asked, genuinely confused.

“Emma MacHale is a goddamn lesbian. She's dating that plain-looking bore from the government. All that effort wasted,” the demon growled.

“Really?” Zac asked, having some difficulty restraining a smile. “I had no idea. How did Emily know? Emma told her?”

“Apparently, there were all kinds of rumors before your world got integrated,” the demon said, his frown deepening as he took out another piece of meat.

Zac thought it was all pretty funny, but he was also a bit confused. Emma had moved here to get away from the government, but at the same time dated one of their top officials. Was Julia not aware of the disgusting things Ogras had mentioned earlier?

It appeared that the slavery in Greenworth wasn't an isolated incident, rather a well-kept secret, where only a few like the mayor were out in the open. Important personnel could ignore rules or even basic human decency, as long as they provided the government with enough benefits. The reason Emma wanted to leave the government was that some of the stars got provided personal slaves, in some cases even children.

Those people had been the ones Ogras went around killing during the night, and after Zac learned of it, he felt it was for the best. He wanted nothing to do with a bunch of degenerates like that. The important part was whether those actions were supported by the government at large, or whether it was a small faction within the splintered organization that acted in such a way.

He was planning on getting to the bottom of things by interrogating Julia, though he didn't want to waste time and effort on that with the wave incoming. It might also prompt

Emma to cause trouble, and he would rather wait until he had the Lord-title in his hand.

“I think it’s great. At least I won’t have to keep poisoning her while she lives in your compound,” Alea suddenly interjected, dragging Zac out of his thoughts.

“What?” Zac asked, turning around with wide eyes. “What did you do?”

“What’s with that look? I just sprinkled a little something that would give her the runs and make her feel bloated and a bit feverish. Not in the mood for a roll in the sack,” the poison mistress said with a small smile. “She thought she had come down with some tropical fever.”

Zac couldn’t help snorting when he heard Alea’s confession. He had avoided the movie star for the last two days while mentally preparing for the third wave, hoping to improve as much as he could. He had mainly focused on incorporating his evolved Dao into his fighting style, and trying to ride on the momentum to gain a second Dao upgrade.

The first part went great, and he felt he possessed a far better command of the Middle Seed of Heaviness by now. The area he could expand his Dao Field had almost doubled after having consolidated his insights, and it even contained a mental component thanks to his latest insight. Unfortunately, things hadn’t proceeded as smoothly in regard to his meditation, and his other seeds were still at an early stage.

“Don’t go poisoning any more of our people,” Zac only said before turning back to look out over the wall.

“Yes, dear,” Alea answered with a wink.

**Incursion Master (Unique): Close or conquer incursion and protect town from denizens of other alignments for 3 months. Reward: 5 E-grade Nexus Crystals, town upgraded to City, status upgraded to Lord. (2/3) [00:00:08:44]**

Zac closed his menu after taking a quick glance at it, taking one last look over his forces. This time, it wasn’t just

him and the demons up on the wall, waiting for the wave to arrive.

The Valkyries stood at the ready, having swapped out their spears for bows. Few of them were excellent marksmen, though the improved attributes made most people decent shots by now. Of course, one might not need pinpoint accuracy if there was a sea of monsters beneath the wall.

There were also the group of tinkerers from Cogstown, who looked the most excited of the bunch. They stood next to two newly mounted cannons, making final adjustments. Zac shook his head with bemusement when he saw a few of them actually talking to the cannons, drawing weird glances from the demons close by.

The first time he saw the craftsmen, Zac had thought Basso was dumping his town lunatics on Port Atwood in a bid to get rid of them. Most of them had large patches of fur singed off and were missing extremities, or even limbs. More than anything, they held a burning madness in their eyes, giving off a very unsettling feeling.

But Zac soon realized he was wrong when he watched them mount one of their cannons on his wall. They were extremely skilled at what they did.

The tinkerers hadn't cared in the least about the various species walking the island but instead focused on the various technologies available. They had been astounded by human contraptions such as computers and cars, but they clearly focused more on things connected to the System, which Zac felt was for the best. This group, in particular, was mainly concerned about weaponizing Nexus Crystals and turning them into bombs, and it was their experiments that had caused them to look like they did.

Zac felt it was a bit of a shame that he couldn't introduce them to Karunthel, the Creator foreman, as he thought they would hit it off quite well. Zac understood why the beastmen were so excited. They saw the third beast wave as an opportunity to field-test various inventions.

Finally, a contingent of roughly a hundred Zhix warriors stood orderly at the wall as well, ignoring anything around them. With them stood Ibtep, who had changed their large backpack for an equally large bundle of wooden javelins with steel tips. The Zhix had been fetched from the island after Ibtep made the offer, and the Holiness had agreed, though the supersized Zhix itself stayed in the hive.

The civilians stayed in the temporary town within the walls, with some having volunteered for various tasks to help out. Those who volunteered were mainly those from the surrounding islands, who already were used to being constantly accosted by beasts. The experts from New Washington had been shocked to hear the town was about to be attacked, with some even demanding to get sent back.

Zac ignored those voices, though, telling them that getting attacked was the norm in the Multiverse and nothing to get worked up over. Julia had wanted to participate in the fight, but on Ogras' advice, she was placed under house arrest during the wave. There was no need to give the government official a panoramic view of the powers of Port Atwood.

This was the last wave and the last opportunity to gain contribution points. Many of the demons had held on to most of their points until now, hoping to gain enough for some more valuable treasures. People would hold nothing back in this wave, perhaps even displaying hidden cards just to push themselves further on the contribution ladder.

There was also the competition between Zac and Ogras. Zac had amassed a bit over 80 million contribution points during the waves, whereas Ogras was at 59 million. The general consensus was that Zac would keep his lead during the final wave, while a few staunch supporters of the demon lord insisted that Ogras had held back until now and was ready to explode into action.

Zac personally didn't care about all that. He only hoped that he would be able to finish the wave quickly so his plans with the teleporter wouldn't get ruined. Of course, he had a backup plan by now.

If the wave wasn't finished and the deadline was nearing, he'd simply step through the teleporter and snatch up John Bernard, and go back. He had wanted to avoid that, as it might result in some retaliation from the government, but as things had progressed up until now, Zac felt it didn't really matter. It was just one more act of aggression to add to the tally.

The minutes slowly passed as everyone waited for what would come out through the portals this time. When there was less than a minute left, Zac suddenly heard a familiar voice in his mind.

**[Special Challenge activated. To become a leader of a world, one needs to possess the strength to defeat any invaders. Rewards adjusted.]**

Zac groaned as he looked around, and it seemed only he heard the voice. Ogras saw the odd reaction from Zac and raised a brow.

“What’s going on?” the demon asked, but Zac had no time to explain when three huge pillars flashed into existence.

Each pillar was far larger compared to the earlier ones and reminded Zac of the incursion pillars. However, the pillars differed from both the sinister red one he'd been living with for a month, and also each other.

One of the pillars was a sickly turquoise color, and it almost looked like ghosts or specters were rotating around it. Zac was immediately reminded of the intelligence report he got from Ogras. The part about the various forces also mentioned the incursions.

The incursions themselves differed in appearance depending on who controlled it, and the turquoise one clearly matched the description of the incursions belonging to the Undead Empire. The second one was pitch black, and it felt like Zac was looking into a black hole as he stared at it.

Zac tried to figure it out but couldn't remember any force having such an incursion in the information missive. It likely meant that it didn't belong to one of the large forces. That didn't mean it belonged to a weak force, but rather a smaller



one that the missive didn't include due to the low likelihood of encountering them. There was no telling from just the light, and it could be either weaklings or a small elite force full of powerhouses.

The final incursion was multicolored in gold and red. Had it only been the lustrous golden color, Zac would have thought it belonged to a church, as it radiated holiness. However, the blood-red intermixed gave a more sinister feeling, and it infected any purity of the gold luster.

“What the hell? Incursions?” Ogras muttered, and many of the demons looked confused as well.

“I got a quest update from the System,” Zac admitted with a sour face. “It said something about me needing the power to defeat invaders to become a leader. Perhaps it felt the normal challenge wasn't annoying enough?”

As if on cue, Zac suddenly heard a shout from behind him. It was Janos, who once again stood at the ready at the control crystal for the array. A large fractal had appeared above it, and any light from the crystal was gone. Zac quickly opened up the town management menu, and as he saw the message inside, his sour face turned to a full-blown grimace.

“Shit.”



## THE THREE FORCES

The town protection array was actually blocked by the System. Zac quickly brought out one of his thunder punishment arrays, and to his dismay, found them looking like lifeless marbles no matter what he tried.

“The Ruthless Heavens indeed,” Ogras muttered with a sardonic grin. “I guess we’ll have to do this one by hand.”

Zac started to wonder whether the System could actually hold grudges. He had cursed at it quite a bit in the beginning when he was stuck alone on the island. Was it retaliating now by increasing the difficulty to unreasonable levels? Or did it try to suppress him since he wasn’t a cultivator?

In any case, the sight in front of him spelled trouble. He wasn’t contending with one force now, but three. More importantly, he was placed against intelligent forces this time. The wolf horde had been somewhat easy to handle since they were dumb beasts, but the same couldn’t be said about actual invading forces.

They would have organized armies and employ strategy in trying to defeat him. He was sure that the System had provided some pretty good incentives to them so that no diplomatic solution was possible. Not that he thought it was possible in any case.

“I think we should charge in, catch them unaware,” Zac said with some hesitation.

He didn’t want them attacking the wall, since it would offer scant protection now that there was no array to secure it.

It might work against dumb beasts, but against an army of high-leveled warriors, it was only a small diversion.

“There’s no way they would be unaware, rather the opposite. They should have been given plenty of forewarning, perhaps even having the opportunity to accept or decline the quest,” Ogras disagreed.

“We should scout them out and gauge their strength. There are some differences between the pillars and normal incursions. They are smaller. I think their forces should be limited,” the demon added. “If they were completely confident in defeating us, they would already have rushed in. The fact that they are playing it safe is telling us something.

Zac gave a start and once again looked at the three pillars. They felt huge where they shone in the distance. However, Zac had to agree that they were quite a bit smaller compared to the one with the demons. That red pillar had stretched endlessly into the sky, clearly visible even from the other side of the island. It had felt like it reached the heavens, and apparently, even the closest islands had seen the red light when the demon incursion had been active.

These pillars were large, but not to that point. They were many times higher than the Ayn hive, but that was about it. Zac wasn’t sure what it meant, but the size of the pillars had indicated the difficulty of the wolf waves. The pillar that sent through the Fiend Wolf had been quite a bit larger compared to the ones before it.

“So we just stand here and wait? It’s too passive.” Zac frowned with impatience. He was in no mood to let the invaders run rampant on his island. Who knew what kind of mess they would create while they stayed on the wall like some turtles.

“It is, but sometimes we need to waste time to save time. We can send out a few scouts to check things out. I’ll even go myself. But we shouldn’t antagonize them until we know their relationship. Who knows, they might even fight each other. The undead forces are notoriously unwilling to work with

almost any other force, and they might just attack the others before turning their attention to us.”

Zac nodded after some thought. Though it sounded implausible, it might be correct. The goal of those forces should be to kill him, and he could only die one time, meaning that only one force would get the reward. Perhaps they would even succumb to infighting for the honor to kill him, provided that they felt he would be easy to handle.

Besides, charging in like a barghest wasn't the best idea. Who knew what cards these people had up their sleeves. He didn't even know what forces two of the incursions belonged to. Gathering intelligence first might be the smartest play.

They had stood at the walls for a few minutes by now, and there still wasn't any activity. Unfortunately, the incursions were far enough that they couldn't see their forces due to foliage blocking the view.

“Very well, let's gather some intelligence,” Zac said, feeling unsettled by the inaction.

He almost hoped that a wave of invaders would come running through the forest at them, screaming and waving their weapons. A full-frontal assault would be perilous, but it would also be easy to handle. He just needed to take out his axe and go crazy. Now he was unsure what to do or expect.

Ogras nodded and disappeared into the shadows. Not long after, Zac saw a few figures blend into the forest as they moved toward the pillars of light. Most of the demons sat down by now with closed eyes, patiently waiting to explode into action. Zac had to stop himself from pacing back and forth like a wreck since he didn't want to show how unsettled he felt because of the situation.

He had already defeated one incursion, but that was different. For one, he had learned that Clan Azh'Rezak was far weaker than the average when it came to the power of the invading groups. Usually the opportunity would have been snatched away by a more powerful force, but Azh'Rezak had managed to hold on to it due to some turbulence in their area.

Secondly, he had deployed guerrilla tactics against the demons, and they didn't even know about his identity until the very end. And finally, the war with the monkeys had provided a stage where he somehow luckily came out victorious.

It was different now, with him being a defender in the open, and at least the undead were a formidable force.

To take his mind off the situation, he opened his quest screen. It had been mentioned earlier that his quest and rewards were updated, and he wanted to see what he would get.

**Incursion Master (Unique): Close or conquer incursion and protect Town from denizens or forces of other alignments for 3 months. Reward: Limited Structure depending on Grade, Town upgraded to Global City, status upgraded to Lord. Road to Sovereignty opened. (2/3)**

There were some differences from earlier, with some more apparent than others. The description had gone from saying only denizens to "denizens or forces," which made sense, as Ogras had told him already that denizens referred to beasts.

The rewards had also changed. The paltry five crystals had been swapped to a Limited Structure, and Zac guessed it was something similar to when he got the Creators' shipyard, though the wording was a bit different.

His town would also be upgraded to "Global City" instead of a standard System-sanctioned city. Since the prompt earlier had mentioned world leader, he'd almost thought for a second Port Atwood would become a capital. However, it seemed that wasn't the case. He wasn't clear about the difference between a city and a Global City, apart from guessing the latter was better.

Finally, there was the Road to Sovereignty. He had no idea what that meant, but he sensed that this addition might be the most important one. He wasn't sure whether to ask Ogras about it or keep it a secret, so for now he tabled the matter. He needed to actually destroy the three incursions for any of this to matter.

It took almost twenty minutes until Ogras was back, during which time Zac only got more and more impatient.

“There are a *lot* of enemies,” Ogras said with a frown. “There’s a veritable sea of zombies, tens of thousands. There’s also aberrations and three-to-four-meter Corpse Golems. Unfortunately, it seems the horde has a Lich or Corpse Lord. Otherwise, they’d have mindlessly charged at us by now, sensing our life force.”

Aberrations were dead beings that were naturally formed in ominous grounds, often being a mix of various species and bodies. No two of them looked the same, as they were essentially randomized mistakes of the universe. Their distinguishing feature was extreme endurance, even for the undead beings.

The Corpse Golems were somewhat similar, though they were constructed rather than formed. Necromancers or Liches created them from a bunch of cultivators to suit their purposes. Usually, they were quite large and a fusion of a group of people.

The more skilled the creator, the more beings he or she could add to the monstrosity, making it stronger. Its height was generally the measure of how powerful it was, where golems above five meters were usually E-grade or above.

“The other forces aren’t as numerous, though their warriors are generally far stronger compared to the zombies. The black portal is owned by a force I don’t recognize. They are either a golem species or something rock related. It was hard to tell. They’re completely pitch black and gave off cold auras. They seemed to have exceptional perception, as they killed the scout we sent before he even came close,” the demon continued.

“The last force is only around a thousand strong, and they might actually be more annoying than the undead. They’re the fools of the Church of Everlasting Dao. I would wager they are on average stronger compared to our own forces,” Ogras concluded with a sigh.

Zac groaned when he learned whom the final incursion belonged to. The Church of Everlasting Dao were the lunatics who went to newly integrated planets simply to eradicate all life. They were of the belief that while the System was compelled to keep integrating new worlds, each time it did so, it expended important energy and hurt itself. That, in turn, prevented the System from evolving itself and the Multiverse.

In order to reach nirvana or whatever, they tried to kill as many people as they could so that more energy would be freed up for the System. The general consensus about this belief was that it either was complete idiocy, or that it was a front for the church elite to stuff their pockets with their victims' wealth.

No matter which case was the truth, it didn't help Zac, as he was suddenly stuck on the island with a bunch of zealots. Furthermore, if another one of the incursions was the famously annoying Undead Empire and another was run by insane inquisitors, the third mysterious incursion likely wasn't any good news either.

"So what do we do?" Zac asked.

"They are holding some meeting at the rock people's place. For now, we hope they have a falling-out and do our job for us."

Zac nodded but didn't feel too hopeful. He could only spread the available intelligence amongst the ranks and keep everyone on alert. Soon the last hope of an internal fight breaking out was dashed, as an army approached the wall.

Zac understood what Ogras meant when he said rock people, as he couldn't really tell their appearance either. They were around two meters tall, and Zac couldn't make out any features, as they were unnaturally black. Zac wondered for a second if they all possessed some racial skill that obscured them, but threw the question to the back of his head as he brought out his axe.

The ground shook as the army approached, and huge boulders were magically ripped out of the ground by the rock people and started hovering above their army, creating quite



the image. The rudimentary traps across the battlefield were all but useless against the sentient species as they approached.

The very air thrummed with power around the incoming group, and even Ogras' ever-present grin was long gone as he looked out over their enemies.

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Bishop Orsiccas leisurely walked back toward his camp, glancing at the army of Yrd Stonemen leaving for battle.

It had been an annoying discovery to find that they weren't the only ones to get the blessing of the Boundless Heavens, but that they instead shared it with two other groups. That kind of situation clearly muddied what should have been a great opportunity to make some money.

It was quite convenient that at least one of them belonged to some weak backwater group. They would make great sacrifices for the Grand Plan, keeping the zealots happy, and in the process scout out the powers of this Sovereign-select.

This was the third world Orsiccas had been tasked with purifying and processing with his fellow bishops, which was why he was chosen to head this special assignment while his brothers kept the activities going in their main base. But this was the first time that he'd heard of a sacrifice to gain such a blessing this early. Sovereign-selects usually only emerged after over a year had passed.

It was also quite the headache to find that the undead scum were here. Whenever the church met those bastards, there was always a bloody battle for the high-potential corpses. Losses went up and profits went down.

At least he wasn't up against a member of the fallen five, but rather a Corpse-lord general. Thankfully, the incursion seemed to be run by a Revenant Lich rather than one of the founding races. Otherwise, Orsiccas wasn't certain he'd be up to the task.

Still, that didn't mean he and his followers were at an advantage here. The church had proper purifier forces who trained especially to combat the undead on the various fronts,

but Orsiccas hadn't brought any here. He'd expected to be up against the humans or one of the other three species of this new planet.

Worse yet, the Corpselord seemed to be a noble with a proper Heritage. Orsiccas even doubted whether he himself was its match. Still, he had a full battle monk contingent with him, which was enough to decimate the undead forces if it came to that.

Orsiccas caressed his mace with a resolute expression. He wouldn't let this one go, even if he had to go up against the Undead Empire, as the bonus he would receive was substantial. Not only the reward from the Boundless Heavens, but also the one he would receive from the church for procuring such high-grade materials.

Someone who was already a candidate for sovereignty over a planet would have to be a prime specimen in creating a premium vessel. Human bodies were always in high demand as well, as many powerhouses chose vessels of the same species as their original bodies.

Orsiccas never understood that kind of mentality. Those old goats had lived for tens of thousands of years, yet they hadn't had enough. Instead, they chose to scrap their mortal coil for one of the Church's vessels, even if it meant retraining their bodies from the ground up.

Not that Orsiccas complained, as that very business had enabled him to reach heights he could only have dreamed of, with a clear path all the way to becoming a C-grade Cardinal. And in the meantime, he would make a pretty penny in the body-retrieval business.

Because to live was to fight, so business was always booming.



## WALL BREAKERS

“Fire at will,” Zac said with a steady voice and nodded to the grinning beastmen.

The tense situation hadn't affected them, and they gleefully made some last adjustments to their three cannons before they fired them. An insanely loud explosion was heard from each of them, and a shock wave even threw away the people closest to the cannons.

Zac knew those cannons would pack quite a punch, but he was shocked at the scene in front of him. He had barely time to register that the projectiles weren't pellets or cannonballs before the three shots landed. One unfortunately veered completely off course, but the others headed for the incoming army in the distance, which quickly erected a group shield.

A blinding light flashed, and a terrifying explosion rattled Zac's eardrums a second later. When he looked out at the battlefield again, two huge craters over fifty meters in diameter could be seen, with dead or wounded rockmen all over. Their shields clearly were of little to no use against those horrifying bombs the crazy tinkerers had created with Nexus Crystals.

Unfortunately, one of the projectiles hadn't gone off, but the power of those that did was amazing.

Zac hoped they could fire off a few more salvos, but a look over at the Ishiate engineers dashed any hope of them being able to shoot the Nexus Crystal-infused bombs again. The three cannons were destroyed beyond recognition, with their

barrels completely twisted and deformed. Two of the tinkers were also down on the ground, bleeding from cannon shrapnel, though it looked like they would be fine.

“Send scout parties to the sides of the wall in case the other forces try to flank us,” Zac said to Ilvere, who nodded and sent a few parties away.

“Ibtep, Joanna,” Zac continued, “your forces will stay on the wall for this one. Be ready to flee if needed. These rockmen are too high leveled. Save your strength for the undead.”

Both nodded in confirmation.

Zac was about to continue, but the huge boulders that were floating above the rockmen suddenly shot out like bullets, soaring toward the wall.

“Shit!” Zac screamed, seeing the gigantic incoming projectiles.

“Take the middle ones; I’ll destroy as many as I can to the right, and Ilvere the ones to the left. The others will have to dodge,” Ogras said.

“Start shooting,” Zac shouted at the Valkyries who stood ready at the siege machines, as he got ready with his axe.

The siege machines taken from Rydel were mainly in the type of ballistae, each made with high-grade materials and having inscribed projectiles. None of the shots were close in power to the monstrous cannons of the Ishiate, but they were easily reloaded, and one shot after another flew at the enemies.

Another huge shield was erected by the attackers after the initial blast from the cannons, and most of the large bolts were stopped in their tracks by the screen. However, Zac knew that every time one of the inscribed bolts slammed into the magic wall, the attackers lost some of their Cosmic Energy, just like it cost crystals to maintain his array when it was attacked.

The huge rocks finally arrived close to the wall, and Zac charged up as many blades of [**Chop**] as he could, ready on the wall walk to intercept them. After some hesitation, he infused his blades with the Dao of Heaviness and launched his

blades in quick order. The blades slammed into huge boulders one by one, not one missing its target.

As his attacks cut into the stones, Zac frowned when he realized that they were imbued with some power as well. The fractal blades managed to destroy the boulders, though barely. The stone fractured into smaller pieces, each around half a meter in diameter. Zac immediately threw a worried glance over at Ilvere, who launched his huge ball on its chain toward his boulder.

Unfortunately, the demon general only managed to create some cracks in the stone and had to scamper out of harm's way when the projectile slammed into the wall, completely destroying a section of it. Similar scenes could be seen on various spots of the wall, where large cracks or tears were created.

A few of the ballistae were destroyed as well, though most were left unscathed. The loss of life was manageable, as most of the armies were gathered at the length that Zac and Ogras protected. Still, a few casualties could be spotted, mainly amongst those on the edges of the army.

The army of stonemen seemed content to stay at the distance, even though their shield no longer could protect them properly from the ballista projectiles. Some ripped through the magic membrane and killed anything within an area of a few meters.

Normally, the bolts should have created more mayhem, but the bolts were inscribed with a lightning attack, and the golems seemed quite resistant. Bursts of lightning bolts flashed amongst the golem people, but the effect was clearly limited, as only those right next to the bolt were noticeably affected.

"We can't let this go on," Zac said with a frown as he saw new boulders rise from the earth.

Ogras, who usually preferred the safe option, actually nodded, and without another word, the two jumped down from the wall and rushed toward the attackers. They wordlessly

came to the same conclusion. They would have to attack the army the same way they did with the psychic wolves.

If the enemies didn't want to come to them, then they would rush at the enemies.

Zac once again charged five huge blades with [**Chop**] as they ran, and unhesitantly shot them at the same part of the shield in front of them. They slammed into the shield one after another, and finally at the fourth blade it broke through, hitting the defenders behind it.

The black golemoids erected personal shields to intercept the two remaining fractal edges, and with concerted effort managed to stop the first one. But the last one created some carnage, as Zac had actually imbued it with the Dao of Sharpness.

Zac took advantage of the opening and with [**Loamwalker**] stepped into the breach, and without pause started swinging [**Verun's Bite**]. Having once poisoned himself with Cosmos Water had one positive side effect. He had become extremely adept at energy control since he'd fought the whole first wave without being able to properly restore his energy with crystals or gathering arrays.

Zac's attacks generally consumed almost no energy, and he only activated his skills for the shortest possible duration. Everything was in order to last as long as possible, allowing him to keep fighting for hours.

Ogras wasn't as careful with his energy, and the familiar pond of shadows spread out amongst the enemies, reaping one life after another.

However, the rockmen were no weaklings, and they mounted a furious resistance to himself and Ogras. It quickly became clear that these things mainly followed two types of Heritage: rocks and ice.

The mages manipulated earth, or to a certain extent their own bodies, in order to launch all sorts of attacks at Zac. It even felt like their skill in stone manipulation was a notch above that of the earth mage demons.

Zac also saw that they weren't some type of stone golems like he and Ogras suspected, since they bled when they were cut down. The blood was blue, and the splotches that hit Zac's face told him it was cold, but it was blood nonetheless.

The other type of attackers mainly manipulated ice. They either used the element to create surprisingly sturdy weapons or shoot small icicles out as hard-to-notice projectiles.

All in all, Zac felt that the fighters were quite strong, but not to the point that it would become a problem for him. He surmised their average power was somewhere around level 50 to 60 if they were average warriors without any special advantages such as unique titles.

Compared with himself with his enormous number of attributes, the assailants were barely able to delay Zac, let alone stopping his onslaught. They would be free contribution points unless they threw out some of their elites soon.

Still, he wasn't able to quickly dispatch them as he'd hoped. Their rocky exterior made them quite resilient, and they had dedicated defenders to keep the others safe. One wall after another, either wrought from earth or ice, stopped his advance, forcing him to redirect his swings.

It also meant that he couldn't send down the average demon soldiers to help out, as they were about as strong on average compared to these assailants. There were only roughly 150 demon warriors, while there were quite a few more rockmen.

Only the true elites dared to venture out every now and then for a blitz attack before rushing back to safety. But even though they were careful, they sustained some wounds as they were pelted by a throng of ice projectiles. Zac's only other backup was the siege machines, which focused fire on the areas of the army far from Zac and Ogras.

Even if Zac was far stronger compared to the golemoids, it was a chore to fight with only two hands against a sea of fighters. It reminded him of his desperate escape from the monkey horde once upon a time.



A few of them did everything they could to intercept his attacks, while the others pelted him from a range. Even though he was strong, he wasn't invulnerable, so most of his time was spent dodging or circumventing the endless walls in the end.

The attacks were quite strong, after all, and Zac couldn't just shrug them off like he usually did with the wolves. He was already starting to accumulate some wounds, though between his gear and Endurance, they were only superficial.

Worse yet, the weird attackers had no problem in launching more projectiles while Zac and Ogras killed their way around their ranks. The demon warriors could block a few of the boulders using the same sort of group shield they'd used during the monkey war, but many still slammed into the wall and gradually destroyed the fortifications.

Suddenly, the rockmen started to retreat, actually sacrificing some of their warriors to keep the duo occupied. Soon Zac and Ogras stood panting next to each other, both covered in blue blood and overlooking a battlefield with hundreds of dead aliens.

Zac sighed as he walked through the battlefield to put the ballista bolts into a Cosmos Sack. It would be easier to repair them than create new ones from scratch, and he knew he would need to use the ballista again soon.

As he traversed the battlefield, he grimaced as he surveyed the damage to the wall. Huge cracks and missing sections all along a section of hundreds of meters made the fortification look like part of some ruins rather than a habituated town. There was no way that the demons would be able to fix it in short order.

Zac didn't understand what was going on. It almost felt like the rockmen had a vendetta with the wall rather than trying to fight Port Atwood's forces. They'd sacrificed a significant number of their warriors just to make some cracks in it.

It made no sense after having fought them for over an hour. The stonemen were strong enough that a normal wall

without the boost of an array would offer little to no hindrance if they wanted to attack head-on.

They could simply have climbed it in seconds and brought the fight to a melee with the demon army instead of getting bogged down with himself and Ogras. That would have caused significant casualties to his forces rather than the small losses from errant boulders.

Ogras seemed to be of the same mind as he surveyed the corpses in the area with a frown.

“I think they are sacrifices,” Ogras hesitantly said. “There is only one force that would be impacted by the wall. The undead. The zealots and the rockmen could simply ignore it. But the stupid zombies would act like the wolves, even when commanded by a leader. They might try to climb the wall, but they would likely fail, becoming prime targets for our warriors to farm some Nexus Coins.”

“So these things are working with the undead?” Zac asked skeptically.

“They’re probably coerced. No one wants to be fodder. It would be the same with Clan Azh’Rezak if we were in their situation. The Undead Empire and the Church of Everlasting Dao are both huge entities in the Multiverse. They could just order around minor forces to do their bidding, and the forces would have to comply due to fear of impacting their home planet otherwise,” Ogras answered with a shake of his head.

“They are being used as a wall breaker while simultaneously testing the waters,” Zac realized with a sigh.

“Yeah. Our only hope now is that they still don’t realize that we don’t possess arrays, and that we simply don’t care about the walls. But those assholes in the undead army are probably laughing it up right now.”

Suddenly, Zac felt a slight tingling of danger and quickly turned toward the forest. As if summoned by Ogras’ words, a dour man stood at the crest of the woods, emitting a dense and powerful aura.

It was a humanoid being standing over two meters tall. On his back was a sinister weapon that looked like a hook that was almost as long as the man himself, completely wrought out of bone. It only took one glance to tell what force this thing came from. The man was deathly pale, while his eyes shone a sinister red.

However, the man wasn't some handsome vampire, rather a walking corpse. There was no rotting flesh, but there was a strong sense of undeath, and the man could by no metrics be called handsome.

"Shit, it's the big boss himself," Ogras muttered and readied his spear.



## GAMBIT

Zac silently stared at the undead entity and was mentally getting himself ready for a desperate fight. However, the Corpse Lord suddenly blazed into action, and suddenly, his bone weapon was in front of him. Almost at the same moment, Zac heard a loud bang from the wall. It was a sound Zac vividly remembered, as he'd almost died the last time he heard it.

The Corpse Lord wasn't as frantic as Zac had been back at the auction house, and didn't even break a sweat as he blocked the bullet with his weapon, giving Zac a clear indication of his power. Zac even had thoughts of fleeing, as he wasn't sure he'd be able to kill this entity.

The Corpse Lord made the choice for Zac as plans and stratagems were flashing through his head. The undead sneered and receded back into the woods, followed by a few hulking Corpse Golems, who stood behind their lord like bodyguards. It appeared the undead leader was biding his time, or perhaps the sniper scared him off.

"It's damn strong," Ogras muttered with a frown as he watched the undead disappear amongst the foliage. "Must be one of the top generals, or perhaps the incursion leader himself. However, I don't think a physical warrior would become leader of their incursions. Better leave that role to a Lich who specializes in creating new citizens."

Zac nodded in somber agreement. The man, if they could be called that, only silently stood in the distance, yet Zac's

senses detected danger. The two quickly finished gathering anything of value before they rushed back to the wall to rest.

“Who has your gun?” Zac suddenly asked, looking over at Ogras, who grinned a bit.

“The old bastard. It appears he was in a human army long ago and has some knowledge of guns,” the demon responded.

Zac knew the demon was talking about Sap Trang, and was quite impressed with both the timing and aim of the old fisherman. It was a shame that the attack wasn't successful, but it was worth a try.

The fight had taken quite a large portion of Zac's energy, but it was likely the same for the rockmen. They had blocked most of the bolts, and the Valkyries and the demons had kept shooting for the better part of the hour until they finally ran out of ammunition.

“Good job,” Zac said to his squadron as he returned to the wall with Ogras in tow.

This time, they simply left the corpses on the battlefield, as it felt too dangerous to venture out and collect them at the moment.

“I'm sorry we couldn't be of more help,” Joanna only answered with a somber expression.

“You did plenty,” Zac said, seeing the Zhix leader walk up to him.

“The Zhix are willing to join you in the next wave,” Ibtep said as they approached.

“Thank you. However, it is better you conserve your strength until the undead arrive. They have an almost endless number of warriors, and at that moment it will be all hands on deck,” Zac answered.

Zac gave a few more orders before he sat down and closed his eyes, each hand holding a Nexus Crystal. Only an hour elapsed before they once again were accosted by the rockmen. There was still no sign of the other two forces, and it felt more

and more true that they were actually using these rockmen as pawns.

Even though he wasn't completely restored, Zac got up on his feet with a groan and got ready to intercept as many of the boulders as possible. This time, a few more of the elite demons with ranged capabilities also descended the wall in order to get close enough to attack as well.

However, even with increased numbers, their efficiency was quite limited. Individual warriors or mages didn't have the capability to breach the strong barriers the rockmen erected, so they were forced to use the breaches created by the ballista bolts.

Zac knew that it would be mainly up to him and Ogras to fight these things. There also was Alea and Janos, but both Ogras and Zac felt it better if those two stayed hidden for now.

The two generals had the type of skills that could turn a battle around, and they weren't pushed to the point they needed to use them yet. Both Zac and Ogras could slowly kill their way through the rockman army without exposing their hidden aces, though it was quite tiring.

The only upside was that he was getting huge benefits from the fighting. The reward for each kill was substantial, with every rockman giving thousands of Nexus Coins. Even though it took some time to kill each of them, the speed with which he gathered Cosmic Energy was unparalleled. If this continued, he'd likely gain a level within the day.

At the same time, Zac knew this couldn't go on. There were only two of them, and they were starting to tire after only two waves. If they allowed the rockmen to keep harassing their front lines like this, he and Ogras would wear themselves out in no time. And these golem-like beings were the weakest of the bunch. Some drastic measures needed to be taken.

"If that Corpselord dies, what will the other undead do?" Zac suddenly asked the demon, who was meditating next to him.

The demon opened his eyes and shot a suspicious glance at Zac. “Hard to say. I think they would be like rabid dogs that got off their leash,” Ogras said. “Why? What are you planning?”

“We can’t let this go on. There’s no way the two of us can fight off the whole rockman incursion and after that face the two elite forces.” Zac sighed.

“You’re just going to jump into the thick of it? Are you insane? You will be in a sea of undead. Even if you find him, it’s not certain he will even fight you,” Ogras said.

“I have to believe they are after my head for their quests. I think he will fight me rather than risk some subordinate getting the kill credit,” Zac retorted with a shrug as he took out his one and only remaining E-grade crystal.

“You know, risking your life like that isn’t the only option,” Ogras said and threw a pointed glance toward the teleportation array in the distance. “If you’re dead, you can’t save your sister.”

“You know how desperate the situation is for our planet. Only a fifth of humanity remains, and the incursions haven’t even begun their attacks in earnest. This might be my best chance to gain power and secure a foothold for myself and my family. If we keep fleeing, we will sooner or later be hunted down, as our enemies will only grow stronger,” Zac said and closed his eyes.

“You’re thinking in some all-or-nothing scenario. There’s nothing stopping you from becoming a powerhouse, even if you lose your lordship and town,” Ogras wheezed out.

“I know, but I must still try. But prepare our contingency. If I fuck this up, we might need to flee in a hurry. And create some diversion if possible.”

“Sigh... Fine, you goddamn lunatic. We’ll see if we can shake up the zealots while you go to the undead. If the big priest joins the battle against you, then you can just lie down and wait for death and reanimation,” Ogras said with a roll of his eyes.



“You have a plan?” Zac asked, curious.

“Well, it’s time for my brave generals to earn their pay,” Ogras only answered with a small grin.

Restoring his energy reserves went quite quickly with the E-grade crystal, and after only thirty minutes, he was mostly restored. That meant he was essentially in full fighting condition, as he’d conserved his usage of his Dao during the two waves, opting to mainly use simpler attacks.

“I’m ready,” Zac said as he stood up.

“Wait, take this,” Ogras said as he threw over a necklace. “It’s a minor trinket that will mask your life aura. It will allow you to get closer to the zombies without them sensing you. Might help you get a move on the big boss before they can react.”

“Thanks,” Zac only said and immediately put it around his neck.

“Remember, Corpse lord nobles are crazy durable. Their ancestors were created like Corpse Golems, but only the best parts were used. They are like walking tanks. Don’t waste your time using weaker attacks, and go for their brains. They can keep going without limbs or even a heart, but they still need their brains. And wait to attack for another fifteen minutes. We need to get ready on our side.”

“I understand. I will do my best. Good luck to you,” Zac said as he looked at his watch and then jumped down the wall toward the inner area of Port Atwood.

Just as he landed, he heard a mumbled, “Good luck,” from above, and he immediately kept running toward the south. Zac planned on taking a slight detour, coming at the undead incursion from the opposite side. It would waste a few minutes, but it would hopefully help even further with his ambush.

When he’d traveled enough, he quickly climbed over the wall and, like a hare, skittled into the woods. He immediately started running full speed, still not making a sound. This was his home turf, and together with his Dao of Trees, he almost

merged with the area, instinctually knowing where to put his feet and which areas to avoid.

He unerringly moved toward the undead incursion in a parabolic trajectory, but some sounds interrupted his charge. He quickly stopped and deviated a bit toward the sound. He suddenly saw a person moving through the woods, carrying a struggling body.

At first, Zac thought it was a demon, as it had reddish and scaled skin, but he quickly realized it was some sort of lizardman, though it didn't have a tail. Since it was neither undead nor a golem, Zac knew it must be a cultist.

Zac also recognized the man he was carrying. It was Adran, who should have been safely back at the camp. His feet and legs were bound, and he had a large black eye. Clearly, the administrator hadn't given up as he kept struggling, making the lizardman stumble and swear.

Zac had no time to figure out how the hell the cult member had managed to infiltrate the town and kidnap one of their leaders from right under his nose, but he quickly went into action. He activated [**Loamwalker**] and appeared right next to the lizardman, who didn't even have time to exclaim before his decapitated head fell to the side.

"Are you okay?" Zac asked as he untied the knots on the rope holding the demon.

"Thank the heavens you found me. That bastard appeared from nowhere. He clocked me right in my eye and bound me; then I was suddenly in the forest," Adran wheezed. "I think it was some random teleportation since the guy seemed a bit disoriented at first."

Zac frowned and looked at the fallen cultist. "Honestly, I found you by chance. We didn't even know you were kidnapped. The town is over that way," Zac said as he pointed toward the wall. "There are no enemies between here and there. Hurry back and warn everyone we might have intruders in the town proper. Try to gather everyone so they can't sneak off with someone."

“I will. Thank you again, Lord Zac,” the administrator said with a bow and hurried back toward Port Atwood.

Zac continued onward, his unease with the situation only increasing. He needed to be quick. Zack believed a large reason why the forces were so hesitant to attack was that his cards were still largely hidden. But if the church captured one of his citizens, they would soon learn that they only had a scant 150 proper fighters and two powerhouses.

That knowledge might give the legion of cultists enough courage to simply charge his town. He needed to create chaos within the undead ranks before something like that happened.

He kept pushing forward for a few minutes until an unbelievable stench entered his nostrils. Zac frowned and slowed down, but unhesitantly kept moving forward.

As he advanced, Zac noted that the forest was ending, the trees seemingly simply gone from where they once stood. Port Atwood still hadn't gotten around to clearing out the forest this far out, so the System must have done it for the incursions.

He silently crept to the edge of the woods, praying that the necklace Ogras gave him would be efficient enough, and peered out over the incursion.

As soon as he looked over the field, he understood where the stench came from. The area around the incursion was completely filled with rotting undead. Patches of skin were sloughing off from their faces, and some missed limbs.

Zac frowned when he noted that almost all of them were actually Asians wearing normal, though ripped, clothes like suits or T-shirts. He'd had a suspicion before, but this seemed to confirm it. These invaders were likely actually from incursions on his own world, not from some other random force in the Multiverse.

He didn't know if it had any implication or could lead to trouble down the line, but that was an issue that he would have to save for the future. He already had way too much on his plate at the moment to worry about such things.

Zac silently scouted the army, trying to find the figure he'd seen earlier. There was a sea of zombies in front of him, but the large Corpse Lord should be easily identifiable from his grisly weapon and the fact that he wasn't rotting away.

But before he could locate the leader, his eyes were drawn toward a few huge monoliths that were arduously carried by a few titanic Corpse Golems.



## DIVERSION

“Where are we going?” Sap Trang asked with some trepidation while looking at his traveling companions.

The world had truly turned crazy. It was just absurd that he was currently walking through a forest with a group of demons. He still wasn't used to these horned beings, even after a month of living together.

“Zac is attacking the undead leader in a bit; we need to cause a distraction,” Ogras answered tersely as the small group pushed forward.

“With only the four of us?” Sap asked skeptically.

It was just him and three demons. Of course, these particular ones were amongst the strongest of the bunch. The poison user could likely kill the whole human squads on their island alone, and he had personally felt the might of Janos' illusions when the demon had trapped him and the other refugees for days in the infirmary.

He hadn't even realized that days passed in the illusion, or that he was trapped in an illusion at all. He had thought they were back in his little village before the world got integrated. He had sat in his small boat with a handmade rod, watching the sunset.

When he got home from his trip, his grandson was there, visiting during a break in his university studies. Duc was truly his pride and joy, the first one in the family who was getting a proper education. Yet he hadn't forgotten his roots and visited home every chance he could.

Sap had almost been reluctant to be released from the illusion, as what more could an old man wish for than what he'd received in there. However, reality waited for no man.

“All these questions,” Ogras retorted with a frown. “Yes, just the four of us. We're heading to the cultists to create some chaos. If possible, gain some contribution points.”

“I just don't understand how this old man fits into the picture,” Sap hesitantly said. “If the three of you can't handle it, then a poor fisherman won't make a difference.”

“Do you think I had you train with my toy just for fun? It's time to provide some assistance,” Ogras said with a small grin.

“The sniper rifle? I've only trained a few days,” Sap said, his long brows rising in alarm.

“You were a soldier before; you've held a gun. That's more than can be said about those little chicks Lord Zac brought back the other day. Besides, Lord Zac likes you, so I'll keep you safe,” Alea said with a charming smile, which only served to make the old man more nervous.

Sap didn't know if his new lord and this woman were in a relationship, but she gave him the creeps. It wasn't right how she could kill someone with just a light touch, her whole body being poison. Then again, that was none of his business.

His goal was to become indispensable to the island, which would eke out a path to the future for his village, which was especially important now that the youngsters were back.

He had a strong feeling that even if Lord Zac went head-to-head against that so-called World Government, Zac would walk out the victor. Between Zac's monstrous power and the wily demon whispering in his ear, Port Atwood was nigh unstoppable. They needed to get through the current situation, though.

“Fine. But if I start shooting their soldiers, I will be spotted after a few shots. It won't cause much trouble,” Sap finally acquiesced.

“Let us worry about that,” Ogras only said with a small smile as the small group pushed into the woods.

They kept moving through the woods at blazing speeds, and Sap was barely able to keep up with the others. He had worked his old body to the bone since he arrived here, but sometimes it felt like there was an unbreachable abyss between himself and these monsters.

Of course, slow and steady wins the race. Sap was aware of that, but unfortunately, his time was limited. If possible, he would strive to reach E-grade race and gain new longevity. He was content with the life he had lived, but if he could watch over his descendants in this turbulent new world for hundreds of years, he would.

Duc was a bright young man, but he was a bit soft. Sap wasn't sure if he would be able to survive on his own in this world, which was far more ruthless compared to the old one. They currently enjoyed the protection of Lord Zac, but who knew what the future might hold. One must always be responsible for his own fate.

Sap saw the huge sinister pillar in the distance, blazing in red and gold. The colors were normally quite auspicious, but the feeling the pillar gave out was horrifying.

The old fisherman started as his shadow suddenly grew and wrapped around him, and quickly looked around to see the same thing happening with the others as well.

Soon they were covered in shadows, at which point Janos waved his hand, and another shimmering layer superimposed on them.

“Only speak if necessary from now, and always at a low volume. Our spheres will mask us, but the sound dampening is limited,” Ogras whispered. “The three of us will be responsible for the main attack. Old man, your job is to pick off anyone who looks like a leader or is trying to organize a response. We want utter chaos.”

“What if they find me?” Sap asked with a frown.

“Then start running. Hopefully, our actions will keep them occupied,” Ogras answered.



The group finally arrived at some thick bushes that were just a few hundred meters away from the clearing with the zealots. They had already snuck past one group of sentries with the help of the combination of Janos' and Ogras' skills.

“Stay inside these bushes. Make no movement or sound, but get ready. The second Janos comes back to your side, start picking off targets. Remember, leaders and people organizing a resistance,” Ogras said to Sap.

Sap really didn't like hiding alone in some bushes surrounded by crazed enemies who were far stronger than himself, but he also knew he didn't have much of a choice at the moment.

“What will you do?” he asked hesitantly.

“Oh, you'll see,” Ogras said with a malicious grin.

Soon the three scuttled away, leaving Sap alone with his thoughts.

*Leaving an old man like this, these youth have no manners,* Sap grumbled in his head, but still gingerly readied the huge sniper rifle, careful not to make any sound.

They didn't have things like this back in the day when they were fighting in the jungles, but only old Soviet-era guns, if even that. Sometimes the shipments had “gone missing,” likely fattening the pockets of some general.

Still, guns weren't complicated. It was point and click. Sniper rifles were a bit harder to handle since one had to take into account things such as wind and elevation. But since he had gained his class, he felt himself getting reinvigorated. The arthritis in his hands and knees was long gone, and his mind was sharper than it had ever been.

While he waited for the demons to finish up whatever madness they were planning, Sap opened up his attribute page to take his mind off things.

**Name: Sap Trang**

**Level: 28**

**Class: Wave Whisperer**

**Race: [F] Human**

**Alignment: [Earth] Human**

**Titles: Adventurer, Giantsbane, Disciple of David,  
Full of Class**

**Dao: Seed of Waves – Early**

**Strength:31**

**Dexterity:16**

**Endurance: 26**

**Vitality: 27**

**Intelligence: 28**

**Wisdom: 26**

**Luck: 8**

**Free Points: 0**

**Nexus Coins: 18,653**

Every time Sap opened his menu, he felt like a man reborn. He still remembered the scant 4 points in Strength he'd possessed when he first found out about this screen. He was seventy-two years old, and before the fall, he'd felt death looming close. But by now, between the medicine bath he took and the improved attributes, he felt as strong as a bull.

It made him think of his young Lord. Zachary was only twice his levels, but his powers were out of this world. Sap even suspected that the young man had long passed 100 points in multiple attributes. He didn't know how that was possible, though, as Sap only received 5 points per level since he got his class. There were many things he didn't understand about the man he chose to follow.

How did he defeat an incursion singlehandedly? It was such a monstrous accomplishment that it was mind-boggling. Unfortunately, he would never get the answer, as neither the Lord nor the demons spoke a single word about anything that happened before he and the spoiled brats had arrived at the island.

Second was the mysterious shipyard. He had asked to work there multiple times, as that was where he felt he could provide the most help. But every time Zachary rebuffed him without hesitation. Those who worked there also never left their area, and Sap hadn't seen them, since they kept him and the other refugees at the docks.

Finally, the attributes of the Lord himself. He had seen the other elites of the world at the auction and instinctively knew that Zachary was almost a different species when he compared and contrasted them. That was why none of the other two mysteries mattered. He was betting on the terrifying power that the Lord of Port Atwood kept showing.

Sap didn't feel it mattered if he himself died, if his sacrifice could create a debt that Lord Zac would pay forward to his grandson and fellow villagers.

With that in mind, he put his eye next to the scope and slowly scouted the camp for promising targets. He was careful not to let the scope rest on any of the warriors, though, as he knew some had extraordinary senses and could sense threats.

The camp consisted of reddish aliens who looked mostly human with a bit of reptile thrown into the mix, and there seemed to be two groups where neither seemed superior to the other. Sap thought it mainly meant they were different squadrons. He also spotted three suspicious tents where leaders might reside. Those tents would be his targets as soon as the mute demon returned.

Sap kept wondering what the trio would do, and his gut told him it would be something sinister. Ogras, in particular, was a bad influence on Lord Zachary, though it was always the evil ones who stayed alive.

Suddenly, he saw something odd. The camp itself looked normal, where the people were minding their business, mainly preparing their weapons and gear. However, above the fortified camp, a scary purple gas rose out of nowhere. Sap frowned, not being able to understand what was going on, but his instincts told him it was related to the plan of Ogras.

He was soon proven right, as a terrifying roar echoed through the camp.

“POISON!” followed by an equally loud roar. “PURIFY!”

The next moment, it was as though reality cracked, as the view of the camp and incursion distorted and was replaced with a similar, but slightly different reality. The soldiers and monks were still there, confusedly looking around.

However, there was also a gas that spread through the camp, and Sap realized that crazy woman must have let something out. He knew it was his time to contribute in a bit, and he was proven right as the reticent demon appeared next to him, also carrying a sniper rifle.

“Get ready,” Janos said as he plopped down while panting.

The Illusionist looked extremely pale, like he was completely wrung out. Still, he waved his hand a bit, and a shimmer covered the two of them.

“Shoot leaders,” the demon said next and after that ignored Sap, who hurriedly looked back into the scope.

At first glance through the scope, he thought the battle already over, as almost all of the church members were covered in a blazing golden flame. However, soon he realized that was some sort of defensive skill that was likely protection against the poison covering the area.

A bang next to him made him refocus, and Sap quickly localized a monk with a slightly more elaborate gown, and without hesitation, pulled the trigger. The man seemed to realize something was up, but it was too late, and his chest and heart blasted open into a huge hole from the high-caliber rifle.

Sap had no time to lament he wasn't getting any Cosmic Energy from the kill and quickly moved his scope to his next target. In this manner, he picked off various warriors one by one. It was an odd feeling, as he knew that each and every one of those he killed were even stronger than the average demon on his island and normally would consider him an ant.

Still, he knew that it wouldn't have been possible without the chaos the trio had created. The invaders seemed to realize

they were attacked from somewhere as well, but something that Janos had done made it so they couldn't pinpoint the origin of the bullets.

The fire seemed to be an effective barrier against the poisonous winds, as it covered the priests in a cocoon. However, it was already too late for many. Quite a few were stumbling around; a few even passed out.

The demon lord and the poison mistress weren't just sitting around either, as more waves of poison kept appearing across the camp, and Sap saw quite a few soldiers get killed by shadow spears suddenly rising from nowhere. Sap couldn't localize Ogras himself but knew he was hiding somewhere to pick off the targets.

He finally had cleared everyone around one of the suspicious tents and moved his scope toward the next one. There he found a clear target for assassination. It was a richly decked priest in a unique gown. He was angrily glaring around, with a shimmering mace in his hand.

Sap slowly exhaled his breath, and when he was completely steady, he quickly moved the scope to hover over the man's chest and instantly pressed the trigger.



## FULL FRONTAL ASSAULT

His odd method of aiming was a special technique Sap Trang was using to give the powerhouses as little warning as possible. He remembered how Lord Zac had seemed to know the bullets were coming before the bang even arrived, and he wanted to avoid that situation. Sap didn't know if his tactic worked, but it should be better than doing nothing.

However, the bullet didn't work on this man, as the high priest roared and a wave of golden flame exploded out from him, covering almost half the camp in an instant. The bullet was scorched into nothingness, and all the poison in the area was incinerated.

A few hundred dead or dying lay on the ground, but a large group was still battle ready, though none looked completely unscathed.

“Conviction!” the man roared while pointing to the west, letting Sap know the high priest was the one who gave the initial warning.

Multiple priests and monks immediately turned toward that direction, and suddenly, it was as though the heavens itself punished the whole area to the west of the camp. Blazing golden beams slammed into the ground from the skies, creating seas of fire that covered hundreds of meters.

Sap guessed the two remaining demons were located in that area, and immediately reloaded his gun and in quick succession fired off two bullets toward the high priest.

The demon shot at the same target, as Janos likely also realized the mace-wielding high priest was the largest threat to their operation and Port Atwood.

Unfortunately, the bullets didn't work any better for the Illusionist either, as every shot disintegrated before it hit the man. Waves of billowing heat kept wafting out from the priest, making Sap wonder just how much Cosmic Energy the man contained. Interestingly enough, the fire didn't seem to harm the priests, but rather strengthen them.

Sap didn't have time to mull it over as the high priest's head suddenly snapped right toward his direction, and it felt as though the priest looked back at him through the scope. Great fear flooded Sap's heart, and it felt as though reality went into slow motion.

"Illusion broken. He knows," Janos said and coughed up a mouthful of blood.

Sap desperately shot another bullet at the man, but it was to no avail as the high priest lifted his mace toward his direction, seemingly giving out a death sentence.

A great light shone down on Sap from the heavens above, and he looked up to see boundless fire descending upon him. It felt like the fire didn't only want to burn his body, but even his soul. Sap completely froze, unsure what to do apart from pray to Buddha.

However, shadows suddenly gathered above him, and the fire was blocked right above him, while the forest around their bushes turned to cinders.

Out of the darkness, Ogras and a three-meter-tall hideous monster stepped out. The monster was full of thorns and vines, and multicolored gases wafted out from it, making it look like something out of a horror story.

Before Sap had time to react, the monster slowly transformed into the female demon. She was burned and bruised in various places, just like Ogras, but it was undoubtedly her. Sap even forgot the battle as he stared at the woman, who frowned as she saw his gaze.



Before Sap could do anything else, shadows started rushing toward Ogras, and it looked like they were becoming a second layer of skin on him.

“Split up and flee,” Ogras said with a voice that sounded as though it came from the depths of hell as his body turned completely black.

Sap unhesitatingly followed the order, as this battle was not something someone like him could intrude upon. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Janos do the same, and further in the distance, he saw a squad of furious-looking priests start moving toward them. A primal fear pushed Sap’s legs forward, but a morbid curiosity made him throw one last look at the battle.

Ogras looked like a god of darkness with two huge black wings on his back as he hovered facing the high priest, who radiated a blazing glory. A gigantic sun burned behind the priest’s back, and the mace in his hand seemed to feed upon the celestial fire.

Sap almost thought he was back in an illusion, but knew he wasn’t so lucky. The world had truly turned crazy.

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The ten-meter monoliths that the Corpse Golems carried around emitted an intensely uncomfortable feeling, as though they emitted the chill of death itself. Zac got goosebumps from their aura even from his hiding spot amongst the foliage. The undead seemed to love it, though, and even fought amongst themselves to get as close as possible to them.

Zac actually knew what those things were since he had looked up as much general knowledge as he could about the undead forces in preparation for finding his sister. He would likely need to traverse the domain of the undead to reach her, and any knowledge would help.

The large pillars were called unholy beacons, and they were tools that transformed Cosmic Energy into Miasma.

There were many unclear points as to how the undead legions could actually exist, but it was clearly linked to Miasma. The undead did not cultivate using Cosmic Energy, and to a certain degree, it was almost harmful to them. While normal Cosmic Energy was without attunement, it could be considered to be a basic building block of life. However, putting that into the body of a living corpse could be quite harmful.

They instead absorbed Miasma, or death-attuned Cosmic Energy as it was also called. Some places where extreme bloodshed had taken place naturally created Miasma; other times, the undead forces manufactured it with beacons and arrays. The beacons essentially terraformed an area into an environment that suited the undead.

The need for Miasma was also one of the reasons why the undead forces created such a number of zombies. Zombies were generally quite weak unless they managed to awaken their intelligence, but they acted as miniature unholy beacons.

Low-tiered zombies could still absorb Cosmic Energy, but most of it was actually released again as Miasma. The process was far less efficient compared to the real beacons, but zombies were self-propagating, creating a natural spread of the undead domain.

Miasma was not too toxic to humans, and one could actually absorb it just like Cosmic Energy. However, doing so for too long would have negative effects, affecting both the mind and the body. That only went for people like Zac who had a sturdy constitution, though.

A normal mortal at level 1 would fall sick and die within a few days if he or she stayed within Miasma, while Zac would be able to traverse the whole incursion without much problem.

Zac hadn't expected the undead invaders to actually bring beacons with them to the island. It meant they weren't just planning a quick assault, but a long-term occupation of the area after his town was dealt with.

A frown emerged on Zac's face as he surveyed the shining pillars, as he couldn't have those things keep spewing out

Miasma. It had only been a few hours since the invaders arrived, but the vicinity was already largely converted, giving it a ghastly feeling.

A large part of the island might become uninhabitable if the monoliths were left unchecked for too long. Their presence only reaffirmed his opinion that the third wave needed to be dealt with in a lightning-quick manner. If everything went well here, he might actually strike a second leader within the hour, as soon as the zombies started rampaging.

There were a few more minutes before the agreed-upon time, and Zac kept looking over the area to get a grasp of the forces the Corpse-lord had brought. He counted at least fifty Corpse Golems, most of which surrounded the monoliths. He could only find five aberrations, though. Perhaps those freaks of nature were quite rare; Zac didn't really have much knowledge about them.

Finally, he spotted a large tent that looked surprisingly normal, apart from its dour colors. The walking corpses didn't care about a roof over their heads, so it should belong to the Corpse-lord. There were a few Corpse Golems standing guard around it as well, making it quite hard to sneak up on.

However, he was already prepared to fight through a sea of zombies to reach the Corpse-lord, as sneaking around wasn't his strong suit. Hopefully, having the necklace while speeding through the masses with **[Loamwalker]** would be enough to give him a leg up on the enemy.

It was almost time, so Zac steadied his breath for a few seconds, some fear lingering in his heart. However, that fear was eclipsed by a steely determination. Months on this island had reformed him and given him an unflinching mentality. Just seeing the horrid sight in front of him would have made him run away screaming a year ago, but now he only looked at it from a tactical viewpoint.

He took out his axe again, carefully looking it over. Hopefully, the upgrade would prove useful in the fight, as the stone had cost six million. He'd felt the excitement of the axe when he fed it the stone, but he still hadn't figured out what

had changed by using it. It looked pretty much the same as before, and he hadn't really felt anything different when he killed the rockmen earlier.

Next he put on a nondescript cloak that would mask himself a bit, and without stalling any further, he rushed toward the command tent when there were five seconds left to the deadline. Each step with **[Loamwalker]** pushed him almost ten meters, barely leaving a shadow in his wake.

Most of the zombies didn't even register Zac's passing by and mindlessly kept milling about. A few gave a start and growled while looking around with confused faces, perhaps trying to understand what was going on.

Zac didn't bother with them as he infused a huge amount of Cosmic Energy into his arms and axe, wanting to end it all with one swift strike.

Finally, he arrived right outside the tent, and Zac was already mid-swing when he appeared. A five-meter fractal blade ripped through the air horizontally, infused with the Dao of Heaviness. A Corpse Golem stood in the way of the swing, but **[Verun's Bite]** had the force of a train as it ripped right through its dense muscles, completely bisecting the hulking golem.

The blade continued unimpeded right into the tent, but as it was almost completely through, Zac felt a painful shock wave in his arm as his swing lost all its momentum instantaneously. A huge shock wave spread out, pushing away any zombies in the vicinity, and two of the huge Corpse Golems even fell on their backs from the force.

The tent was rendered into ribbons by the wild energies, showing Zac the interior of the tent. The Corpse Lord stood stable like a mountain, his bone hook holding Zac's fractal blade in place. Zac's eyes met with the sinister eyes glowing like red orbs of the undead leader, and the Corpse Lord's mouth opened into a ghastly grin, showing sharp teeth.

"I suspected you might try this, human," the undead warrior said with a sneer. "You think my true death will solve

your problems, and you might be right. But just this amount of power won't be enough."

Zac didn't know why he could understand the undead general's words, but it didn't matter. He didn't answer the taunt, instead quickly materializing a new fractal blade. He actually noted that the hand of the Corpse Lord was very subtly shaking, probably meaning that the defense wasn't quite as relaxed as the undead humanoid wanted to make it look.

He remembered Ogras' advice and mustered all he had in each of his swings. He needed to end this quickly before he was overrun by a sea of undead monstrosities. Each of Zac's swings was imbued by either his Dao of Heaviness or Dao of Sharpness, and he tried everything in his book in order to create an opening.

The undead was an even match, the huge bone hook tearing through the air to meet each and every swing. Zac noted with some relief he was actually pushing the man back a bit, and kept his pace up. However, he didn't dare relax, as it seemed the undead wasn't using any Dao, and Zac wouldn't believe a leader of an incursion didn't possess a few of them at least.

Zac was also getting a constant stream of Cosmic Energy, as the zombies in the area unhesitatingly joined the fight between the two powerhouses and kept streaming toward Zac in an effort to disrupt his rhythm. However, the zombies were too weak to do much of anything, and most were destroyed simply by the errant energies or shock waves from the battle.

Suddenly, the Corpse Lord jumped back and released a bestial roar. The unholy beacons around them blazed to life and shone with a ghastly turquoise that covered the whole area. The world turned almost monochrome with all warm colors in the spectrum gone.

It appeared the Corpse Lord was going all out.



## LIFE VERSUS DEATH

Whatever the undead leader unleashed didn't just affect the unholy beacons, but the whole area was affected. The zombies in the vicinity of the fight suddenly shrieked as they fell on the ground, melting with visible speed.

The former humans turned into a putrid goop, and from the puddles, a stream of deathly energy rose, joining the energy the monoliths released. Zac hesitantly looked around, and his visibility was quickly getting blocked from the immense amount of Miasma rising in the air.

In seconds, the whole sky was covered with billowing waves of Miasma, and Zac felt like a small boat on turbulent seas. The density of deathly energy was skyrocketing where they were fighting, and Zac was starting to feel a bit nauseated. It quickly got to the point it forced him to start circulating his Dao of Trees to combat the nausea.

A torrent of energy was gathering above the Corpse lord, who started emitting an even mightier aura compared to before. Zac wasn't sure what was going on, but he knew he had to do something about the situation. If the Corpse lord swallowed up all the energy in the skies, he would turn into a true monster.

Zac pushed off the ground and created an overextended edge that he swung in an effort to disrupt the gathering Miasma above the Corpse lord. He knew he couldn't rip apart the whole miasmatic cloud in the sky, but he could at least do something about the part the Corpse lord tried to absorb.

Unfortunately, it was like cutting air, and the edge harmlessly passed through it.

Zac knew from the start that his swing might fail, but he kept the swing going and released the edge right toward the closest monolith. The fractal blade flew away, and with a thundering explosion, destroyed the undead beacon.

An enormous shock wave of wild energies erupted from the monolith, instantly killing a few Corpse Golems and hundreds of zombies. It seemed all the Cosmic Energy and Miasma gathered in the pillar was released like a bomb when the beacon broke. Zac suddenly felt a huge surge of Cosmic Energy in his body, proving that the System credited him for all the kills.

Zac noted with some relief that the clouds quickly thinned out a bit, and set his sights at a second pillar. However, the Corpse Lord wouldn't have it and quickly intercepted Zac's second strike. The leader seemed taken by surprise by the fact that the fractal edge could detach from the axe, but he wouldn't make the same mistake again.

The undead leader suddenly pushed one of his hands toward the sky with a ripping motion, causing two swirling torrents of Miasma to emerge from the clouds, quickly transforming into actual fractal beasts. They looked like some sort of worms with huge maws and emitted an intense aura of death.

The two Miasma monsters descended, and Zac quickly summoned multiple fractal edges and launched them at the beasts. To Zac's disappointment, the edges only passed through just like with the clouds, as the monsters were largely incorporeal.

At least the beasts temporarily lost their forms from the swings, and two clouds landed on him instead, completely drowning the area in highly concentrated Miasma.

Zac hoped that was it, but to his dismay, he saw the clouds starting to re-form, and from just standing in the clouds, he was quickly growing numb and deathly cold. Desperate for a solution, Zac released Cosmic Energy imbued with the Dao of



Trees into the area where the beasts were re-forming, and it actually worked.

The pure life energy created some sort of reaction in the re-forming beasts, leaving two convulsing clouds failing to properly re-form. It would likely have been better to just cut them with edges imbued with the Dao, but he still wasn't able to imbue his edges with the Dao of Trees.

Just as Zac breathed out in relief, he felt an intense danger and immediately jumped to the side while activating a defensive charge on his gear. At the same time, he started gathering his remaining energy into the fractal on his arm, preparing for a final desperate gambit. If it failed, he would have to flee and take as many as he could with him through the teleporter.

The Corpselord emerged out of one of the clouds, the air around him distorting from the teeming energy in his body. His whole body was swollen, likely from absorbing an unordinary amount of Miasma. The bone hook in his hands shone with extremely concentrated energy, and it made a beeline straight for Zac's torso.

Zac hoped that the erected shield would buy him some time, but to his horror, he saw that the shimmering barrier actually cracked soon after the undead leader's weapon slammed into it. It was the first time his gear wasn't able to block a strike, proving the power of the Corpselord.

With the barrier destroyed, the sinister bone weapon continued into his gut, and the pain made Zac almost immediately pass out.

It was far worse than a normal stab wound, and it actually felt like Zac was dying. However, he grabbed hold of the hook with his hand, refusing to let go as he finished pushing energy into the fractal on his other arm. The fractal was finally satiated, and Zac pushed his arm forward with a roar.

Reality cracked, and the familiar hand from **[Nature's Punishment]** extended down toward the Corpselord from above. The spatial hole also released a torrent of a multitude of colors that offset the deathly lights of the monoliths.

The Corpse-lord looked alarmed for the first time since the fight started, and without hesitation, he pushed backward with immense speed, even giving up the weapon that Zac was holding on to.

However, he couldn't outrun the gigantic hand that wanted to crush him. As he fled, the undead leader stabbed his sharp nails into his own chest while gritting his teeth.

For a second, Zac thought the Corpse-lord had made a mistake, but he quickly realized he was wrong. A disgusting black ichor rushed out like a waterfall from the wound the undead created, to the point that the hand from **[Nature's Punishment]** was getting completely drenched.

"WORLD ROT!" the undead roared, and Zac felt a pain in his arm that even eclipsed the wound in his gut. It felt like his hand was quickly rotting away, and even though he had imbued the hand with the Dao of Trees, the protection was limited.

At least Zac's Dao stopped the hand from immediately disintegrating, and Zac used all his determination to do some damage before it was too late. The rotting hand swooped down to crush the Corpse-lord, who desperately dodged.

However, the hand was huge, and it at least managed to grab one of the arms of the undead leader and, with a sickening crunch, broke it beyond recognition before Zac was forced to release the skill.

It was either that or lose his life, as he was afraid the rot would spread if he let the black liquid keep corroding the huge hand. Zac felt feverish and nauseated, but he wouldn't let the opportunity go as he mustered some of his last reserves to move next to the Corpse-lord. Zac didn't use any fractal or skills, only the Dao of Heaviness with the true edge of **[Verun's Bite]**.

The Corpse-lord was momentarily distracted from the pain of getting his arm crushed, but he still used his arm to block the axe strike instead of getting decapitated. The axe slammed into the Corpse-lord, whose inhuman sturdiness stopped the edge after only pushing in a small bit.

The Endurance of the undead general was clearly far higher than Zac's, and his body was as good as any defensive gear. Zac noticed the undead used some sort of defensive skill, though, as the arm was shimmering with Miasma.

Zac suddenly felt a primal rage erupt from the axe, and the teeth on it started to rattle. Without warning, a spirit of some prehistoric beast with a huge maw emerged from the axe and bit into the shoulder of the Corpse lord with a growl.

The undead screamed in rage and tried to hit it away, but it was an incorporeal being. With a quick motion, the beast ripped out a large section of the Corpse lord's shoulder before dissipating into nothingness again.

Zac didn't understand what just happened, but he felt this was his last chance to kill the undead leader. Both his arms were currently ruined, one from **[Nature's Punishment]**, while the other had been almost completely severed by the axe ghost. The axe was also freed from the arm from the bite, so Zac swung it down again at the Corpse lord.

The undead was in a miserable state and kept trying to move away from Zac. His desperate assault was starting to produce real results, even though Zac himself also was in a miserable state.

Zac looked down at his freely bleeding wound and saw that there was a sickly black tinge to it. It was painful beyond compare, and he quickly swallowed one of his best healing pills to combat the wound. He felt warmth spread through his body, but it seemed it had small effect in working against this particular wound.

Still, there was no time to worry about this. Zac rushed toward the mangled Corpse lord and, with a growl, swung his axe. He also ignored his pounding head and infused it with the Dao of Heaviness one time after another. Each swing was like a falling meteor, and the Corpse lord was struggling more and more in avoiding a killing strike.

Unfortunately the Corpse lord possessed some sort of odd skill that made him swap positions with a zombie, foiling Zac time and time again. However, its range was quite limited and

seemed to cost quite a bit of Miasma, so Zac didn't relent and kept following like a bloodhound.

Finally, Zac managed to strike out before his target once again performed the body swap, and the axe hit down next to the neck of the Corpse Lord, cutting straight down toward his lung, drawing a huge torrent of the black ichor.

The man looked like he was barely hanging on, but before Zac could finish him off, a humongous fist closed in on him. He didn't even have time to dodge, and the fist clocked him right in his face. With Zac's monstrous Endurance, he was largely okay, but while he wasn't hurt, the power of the swing threw him away.

Zac had been too focused on the undead leader, completely ignoring his surroundings, allowing a Corpse Golem to sneak up on him. Zac quickly tried to return to the undead leader to deliver the final strike, but the aberrations and Corpse Golems went berserk as they disregarded their safety and swarmed him.

Zac was feeling woozy from his festering wound and energy consumption, but he gritted his teeth and killed them one by one, each kill giving him a huge infusion of Cosmic Energy.

It only took thirty seconds to push past the resistance since he was going all out, unheeding of energy expenditure, but Zac couldn't locate the Corpse Lord as the last aberration fell. He looked all over and finally found his target right next to the incursion crystal, his bone hook somehow back on his back.

"We will meet again, human. Death won't be a reprieve for you," the undying general said with seething rage as he jumped straight into the shining crystal.

A light flashed, and before Zac even had time to react, the undead leader was gone, and soon after, the crystal lost its luster.

As if something had snapped in the heads of the zombies, they almost instantly started roaring, gaining a bloodthirsty aura. Relief flooded Zac's mind, and he almost sat down to

rest. He hadn't managed to kill the undead leader, but at least he'd completed his mission.

But he barely had time to take a breath when a stone spear erupted from the ground, going straight for his heart. It thrummed with abundant ice-cold power, and Zac didn't hesitate in using his second defensive charge.

As the stone spear approached, darkness congealed into a stoneman dressed in exquisite gear, and Zac's eyes locked with two black holes filled with malice.



## WOUNDED

The stone spear slammed into Zac's hastily erected shield, and while it held true this time, many cracks spread over the barrier, which was a testament to the power contained in the attack.

It seemed that Zac couldn't rely too heavily on his gear in the future, as its efficacy was limited. He himself had broken through Rydel's protective talisman with his final attack, and this was the second time he was almost killed from his own shield failing him.

"We were treated as fodder, yet in the end, it's the Yrd who will reap the benefits," the new attacker said with a deep and gravelly voice.

Zac was somberly looking at his new assailant, guessing it was the leader of the rockmen. Its appearance spelled very bad news. Zac was in no condition to fight another intense battle like the last one, even if the rockman wasn't as strong as the Corpse-lord. Zac had overtaxed both his mind and his Cosmic Energy in his previous fight, and he was barely able to contain the festering wound in his side.

Still, there was nothing to do. He was unsure whether he would even be able to flee if he tried, as the rockman leader seemed to have some type of movement skill as well. But he wouldn't give up until his last breath, and Zac wordlessly brought up his axe once again.

But before Zac had time to figure out a battle plan, a beam of darkness went straight for the rockman, and Ogras appeared

right next to him almost simultaneously. The demon touched his shoulder, and the last thing Zac saw before the shadows swallowed the two was the rockman slashing Ogras' shadow spears to smithereens.

The two reappeared somewhere in the forest, and Zac quickly scanned the vicinity for any enemy forces, and only relaxed when he noted they were alone. He was about to ask why they didn't stay and fight, but before Zac could open his mouth, the demon keeled over.

Zac finally took a good look at his companion and was shocked at what he saw. The demon was in an even worse state than he was. Grisly wounds and burns covered multiple parts of his body, and everything from his left elbow down was simply missing, leaving just a bloody stump.

Horrified, Zac hurried toward Ogras and tried to help him up.

"Are you okay?" Zac asked with concern. "What the hell happened to you?"

"Stop staring. Carry me back to the wall," Ogras wheezed back, and Zac complied as he picked him up and started running, the pain in his side almost making him pass out.

The wound in Zac's gut burned like someone was groping around in there with a hot poker, but it looked like he was forced to simply bear it for now. He'd already tried eating one of his best healing pills, but it did virtually nothing for him.

He would need to consult the physician when he was back. He couldn't ask the demon about it either as it looked like Ogras was barely conscious at the moment.

Zac was having trouble staying awake as well, but he stubbornly pushed forward one step at a time. His vision was closing in on him, but he refused to topple over. Finally, the forest gave way to the prepared battlefield, and the sight of the ruined wall entered his eyes.

Zac summoned strength from god knows where and resumed his run toward safety. Each step was a challenge, and he almost fell into a few of the crude pits, but eventually, he



reached the wall, only to see the demon soldiers nervously waiting.

Fearful and despondent eyes looked at the pathetic figures Zac and Ogras made, clearly feeling that all hope was lost. The two didn't look like heroes making a triumphant return, but rather like the vanquished returning in defeat.

“What's with those faces? Lord Zac prevailed over the undead general, and the unliving are going feral as we speak, attacking friend and foe alike,” Ogras roused and shouted with a powerful voice, and took a lizardman head out of his pouch.

“The leader of those fucking cultists didn't prove a match against a true demonic warrior either,” the demon continued and threw away the head, its arc drawing mesmerized looks.

“Their leaders are dead; their lines are in disarray. We won! It's time to reap some contribution points.”

“Take your positions!” Zac followed up with a roar, and the demons and other squads formed proper lines along the broken wall with newfound vigor.

Joanna and two other Valkyries came rushing toward Zac, who slumped down on the ground behind the newly formed lines.

“Are you really okay?” she worriedly asked, but was soon pushed out of the way by Alea, who went down on her knees next to him and checked his wound.

“Your wound is filled with highly concentrated Miasma; you need to get rid of it, or it will spread,” she said with a low voice, careful not to let anyone else hear.

“I tried eating a healing pill, didn't work,” Zac tiredly muttered as he took out a few normal Nexus Crystals.

“I know you have some sort of nature Dao; use that as well for now,” she said with a sigh.

Zac opened his eyes and properly looked at the poison mistress. She was in bad shape as well, with many bloodied spots on her dress. He looked around and saw Mr. Trang standing close by with one of the huge sniper rifles on his

back. He had a somber expression Zac had never seen before, and he warily gazed at Alea next to him.

Alea followed Zac's gaze and sighed. "We attacked the cultists; things got out of hand. Ogras saved us and stayed behind to fight. It seems he won. We'll explain it later; recover for now," Alea quickly recapped.

Zac knew there were things that were missing from that explanation, judging from how Alea and Sap looked, not to mention Ogras himself. But for now, he had to focus on recovery. The day wasn't over.

Actually, he hadn't dared ask Ogras what had happened with the church while they fled back toward the wall, afraid of the answer. But it seemed Ogras had actually fought to the point he lost a limb in order to not only distract, but destroy the cultists.

Zac described the appearance of the leader of the rockmen in detail in case he tried something again, then closed his eyes and resumed absorbing the Nexus Crystals. He wished he could follow the advice of Alea and also use the Dao of Trees, but his head felt like he had a concussion, and he was afraid he'd pass out if he actually tried to use a Dao at the moment.

Zac instead fully focused on recovering his Cosmic Energy, but after only ten minutes, a multitude of roars interrupted him. He quickly glanced over and saw it was a sea of undead, who were rushing toward their army.

"I killed most of the strong ones, but wake me up if you start having problems handling it," Zac said to Alea, who was still standing by his side.

"Don't look down on us demons. While we might not be monsters like you, we're no weaklings. Just rest up and let us and the little spear-kittens you are training solve this. Oh, and the insect people seem particularly motivated," Alea said with a slight smile.

Zac couldn't help looking over at the small Zhix contingent and saw they were visibly irate.

“Unholy things. Abominations,” Ibtep said, and angry clacking spread amongst their kind.

Zac shook his head and kept focusing on his recovery. His headache had subsided somewhat by now, but he still didn't dare use his Dao, and his wound kept hurting like hell.

Soon the army clashed with the zombie horde, and Zac kept surveying the battle from a part of the wall that was still halfway standing. It seemed that neither the cultists nor the rock people were present, and Zac hoped it was due to them having their hands full with their own undead hordes.

For now, his army was doing fine, and the unrelenting waves of undead served mostly as fodder. There were some aberrations and Corpse Golems left, but they either were dealt with by groups of demon soldiers who whittled them down, or sometimes a lightning bolt from the ballistae ended them.

Even the contingents of Valkyries and Zhix could fight in hand-to-hand combat, though their combat tactics were quite different. The former slaves used large shields as roadblocks as they methodically stabbed the zombies with their spears, felling them one after another.

The Zhix were far more aggressive, bisecting the zombies one by one, and simply shrugging off the occasional swipe from them. Still, there was some sort of unspoken coordination between the insectoid warriors, as any time one of them risked being seriously injured, a spear or a knife suddenly arrived from someone else to neutralize the threat. There was some sort of order to the apparent chaos, but Zac couldn't figure it out.

Almost an hour passed, and there was still no sign of the stronger forces, and Zac was starting to get worried that they were up to something. A sudden movement to his left made him look over, and he saw a pale-faced Ogras get to his feet, a thick clump of shadows covering the stump on his left arm.

“What are you doing? Sit down and rest,” Zac said with raised brows. “They are doing fine.”

“I just lost an arm, no big deal. I’ll regrow it later. I am mostly restored apart from that, and I don’t need the hand to use my skills,” the demon answered with a shrug.

Zac knew the demon was lying, but Zac wouldn’t stop him. He knew the personality of the demon. Ogras was selfish, careful, and calculating, but he’d actually fought to the point he’d lost an appendage and almost died for Port Atwood. Zac knew it wasn’t as easy to regrow the limbs as the demon let on. It was certainly possible, but the pills were quite rare and expensive.

Besides, even after having regrown the limb, it took time and effort to redraw the pathways and retrain the limb. Losing an arm was no small matter for a warrior, and it would take years to get back on track.

“Don’t overextend yourself. The last leader is out there somewhere, he’s unharmed, and there’s no way these zombies can kill him,” Zac said with a tired voice.

Ogras only nodded before shadows gathered around him, and he disappeared.

The battle raged on, and it was as though the undead were unending. The Valkyries had been forced to back away, as they were starting to make mistakes due to being completely wrung out. However, Zac knew that each one of them had gained a significant amount of Cosmic Energy from the intense bout. He had killed a couple of zombies before, and he knew they gave a few hundred Nexus Coins each.

The Zhix warriors lasted a while longer, though they eventually had to reluctantly back away as well, leaving only the battle-hardened demons to defend the long stretch of ruined wall. They couldn’t clump together, as that would allow the zombie horde to pass them by and go after the numerous civilians who still were in the town.

A lot of demon craftsmen and other noncombat classes were also helping out, constantly building temporary fortifications along the destroyed wall in order to shorten the distance the defenders had to cover. They used everything from chopped-down trees to random boulders.

It didn't look pretty, but it worked well enough as long as it was tall and sturdy. They were up against brain-dead zombies, and almost anything sufficed.

Zac looked over his army, seeing that almost no one was unharmed after the unrelenting battle. Zac was quite happy that the zombies in the Multiverse weren't quite like those in the movies. A bite from a zombie didn't turn you into one.

The wound would likely get infected, as the zombies were crawling with all kinds of bacteria, but that was about it. One had to actually die first to turn into a zombie, where Miasma entering the corpse caused the transformation. That was why there also was no cure, since even if one cured the zombification, the cured patient would still only be a corpse.

There was some scuffling next to him, and Zac looked over to see a bandaged Janos standing there, silent as usual.

"I heard a bit about your feats with the zealots. Great job," Zac said.

"Hm," Janos only answered with a slight nod.

Zac didn't mind, as he was too tired to keep up a conversation in any case. He kept rotating between silently meditating with his eyes closed and occasionally overseeing the battlefield. However, as he once again was about to close his eyes, a terrifying sense of danger erupted in his mind, and his eyes opened up wide.

He looked around but only saw the taciturn Illusionist still standing next to him. However, in his hand was a slender sword Zac had never seen before, and it was moving straight at him.

Zac had no room to maneuver or time to react, so he was reduced to helplessly watching as the blade plunged into his chest.



## BETRAYAL

Searing pain exploded in Zac's chest as a blade ruthlessly pushed toward his heart. He was out of defensive charges from his gear, and instead had to settle for desperately moving his torso slightly to avoid getting his heart skewered. The blade still slid in between two of his ribs, and he was seriously wounded, though he avoided any lethal damage.

Cosmic Energy started gathering as various thoughts were flashing through his head. Were the demons finally making a move on him? Did Ogras' injuries make him impatient to seize control? Or was Janos just going rogue, just like Namys?

Zac coughed up a mouthful of blood as he scrambled to his feet, but the piercing sound of a sniper rifle made him quickly throw himself on the ground again, the wounds in his body only worsening. His vision was swimming, but he desperately looked around to see what was going on.

Janos stood in front of him with a confused look on his face as he looked down at a large hole in his chest that was gushing torrential amounts of blood. Soon after, the demon collapsed right next to him. Zac quickly looked to the origin of the sound and found Sap Trang rushing toward him with a determined expression, a smoking sniper rifle in his hand.

Each breath was torture, but Zac forced himself up again and quickly took out one of his healing pills. It might not work against the Miasma in his old wound, but at least it should help against his new one. He quickly swallowed it with a shaking hand as he brought out his axe with an enraged expression.

The commotion caused both demons and humans to look over, and the scene with a dead Janos and heavily bleeding Zac caused widespread confusion. The Valkyries scrambled to create some distance from the demonic warriors, while the demons confusedly looked at each other, hesitating about what to do.

It didn't take long before Alea rushed up toward Zac, but she was stopped by a huge fractal edge being directed at her.

"Stay back," Zac coughed with a grim face, blood still flowing down his mouth and from his wounded lungs.

Sap didn't hesitate either, but pointed his reloaded gun at the poison mistress, all the while warily scouting the vicinity. Alea looked startled but immediately moved back a bit with some sadness in her eyes. Ogras himself was still suspiciously absent, and Zac couldn't spot him either on the battlefield or amongst the defending army.

A warm glow gathered in Zac's chest, and he took a few more ragged breaths as the pill worked its magic. However, he didn't have time to really rest up, as Janos' body bloated up, and with an explosion of golden flames, erupted into an inferno right next to him. Zac quickly grabbed Sap and flashed away with the help of **[Loamwalker]**.

However, just as he reappeared some distance away, another sense of impending doom rattled his mind, and he quickly threw himself and Sap to the ground. A freezing chill erupted in his leg, and he quickly looked down to find it skewered by a black icicle. His whole leg was turning completely numb from the frigid spike, and he wasn't even able to extract it, as it had completely frozen the area of his thigh.

With a groan, he got back to his feet, ignoring the pain in his leg, and with mad swings, intercepted a storm of small icicles following the large one. Zac looked around and finally found the source of the attacks. It was the rockman leader Ogras had helped him escape from earlier.

It looked like he was trying to fish in muddy waters and take advantage of the fact that the other two leaders were dead



or gone from the island. However, while Zac had been caught unaware by Janos' betrayal, he was in far better condition right now compared to when they'd met last time.

He had absorbed quite a bit of energy from the crystals by now and could manage a short battle even with his wounded chest.

Zac unhesitatingly pushed forward with **[Loamwalker]** and appeared right in front of the surprised golem leader with his axe mid-swing. However, the leader was a veteran fighter, and a thick wall of black ice materialized out of nowhere to intercept Zac's strike.

A powerful shock wave erupted from the impact, and Zac had to grit his teeth together to not let out a whimper from the pain. His swings carried a tremendous amount of force, and the shock waves only made his wounds worse.

A great boom resounded in the air, and a chunk of the rockman's side was blasted away, causing blue blood to paint the ground. It was Sap Trang, who had timed his shot perfectly with when Zac's swing destroyed the ice wall. The leader managed to react fast enough to avoid his chest getting blasted open, but at least it wounded him. Thankfully, this boss wasn't able to completely stop the bullets like the Corpselord was.

The rockman roared, and suddenly, the area started trembling. Zac felt a new sense of danger as he saw the area rapidly freeze.

"Run!" he shouted as he activated his movement skill, deftly dodging an ice spear, followed by a veritable torrent of attacks that flew in all directions.

Zac's shout had warned quite a few, but a few Zhix, Valkyries, and demons were caught in the large ice storm the rockman created. Even the demon warriors caught inside soon succumbed after desperately having defended against the onslaught of ice spears from above and earthen stalactites from below. In just a few seconds, the whole area was transformed into a confusing mess of icicles, ice walls, and jagged rocks.

Zac was forced to keep moving about using his movement skill while wildly waving his axe to destroy the projectiles that kept whirling toward him. But the projectiles were in the hundreds, and he couldn't destroy them all.

Luckily, the power of each individual projectile was limited, and with his Endurance, they only created shallow flesh wounds. However, whenever an icicle hit the new wound in his chest or the festering one in his side, he almost keeled over from the pain.

And it was at exactly one such time that the rockman suddenly re-emerged right behind Zac, giving him an acute sense of danger. He lifted his axe to try to parry whatever the rockman had planned, but suddenly, a few spikes materialized around the two and unerringly slammed into various spots of the rockman.

The leader wailed in pain, and Zac took the opportunity to swiftly decapitate the man with a horizontal swing. A huge surge of Cosmic Energy entered his body, but Zac didn't care about any of that. He quickly looked around and saw a grisly scene.

Alea stood some distance away, covered in blood from head to toe. She was impaled in three spots by frozen stalactites, and her whole body was heavily wounded from the uncountable small icicles that were rotating in the air. She had a strong constitution in order to handle her poisons, but not to the point she could shrug off attacks as Zac did.

Their eyes met, and Alea gave him a small smile before her eyes rolled up and she collapsed on the ground. Zac didn't hesitate, but instantly moved to her side with **[Loamwalker]** and scooped her up in his arms.

Since the rockman was dead, the ice storm ended, but the huge ice walls and rocky formations that trapped him were still there, forcing him to run through the maze.

If he were alone, he might have just punched his way through or jumped over the obstacles, but with Alea's wounds, he didn't dare do anything so drastic.

As he ran, he suddenly heard the familiar unfeeling voice.

**[Mission Complete. Calculating Grade. Grade: B.  
Adding 4 hours of Contribution gathering.  
Incursions close in 30 minutes. Contribution store  
remaining time: 24 hours.]**

It was the first time Zac actually heard the System's voice when he completed a quest. Usually, there were just prompts that showed his progress. He briefly wondered if there was some special reason for this, but he didn't have time to mull it over, as he was out of the icefield.

Zac found himself close to the back of the battlefield. Most of the demons were still focusing on keeping the zombies at bay, but a small defensive perimeter had also been created with a dozen demons standing prepared at the edge of the frozen field. Sap was standing next to them, looking fidgety.

"Young man, are you all right?" Sap shouted as he ran up to Zac as soon as he emerged from behind a protruding rock.

The old fisherman was still carrying the sniper rifle around, warily looking down at Alea in Zac's arms.

"Did you...?" he hesitantly said, seemingly afraid to continue.

A few demons were looking cautiously at him as well, their eyes darting between Zac's face and the unconscious and bloodied demon general in his arms.

"Don't look at me; look at the zombies. Alea risked her life to save me, and thanks to her, the last of the enemy leaders is dead," Zac said with a hoarse voice as he carefully put her down and fed her a healing pill.

The demons relaxed somewhat when they saw the pill Zac fed her. It came from Rydel's Cosmos Sack and was a well-known top-tier pill in the demonic factions.

"The quest is completed; the final leader is dead. You have four more hours to rack up as many contribution points as you can, but after that, you won't gain any anymore. You have another twenty hours to buy from the Contribution Store before it disappears as well," Zac said. "The incursion will

close in thirty minutes. That means that the rockmen and the remaining zealots will likely flee.”

He wasn't sure about the last statement, but he hadn't seen either since he'd returned from the wall. The rockmen had taken significant losses earlier, and they were also the force closest to the undead incursion. Zac doubted they would be a problem, since they should have their hands full.

He was more worried about the zealots, as they didn't seem the type to just give up in the face of death, from what he'd read about them. Crazy fanatics rarely took the most logical actions. But they were also missing, which was fine with Zac for now, as he needed to rest, and Ogras was missing.

The demons looked ecstatic at the news and started to fight the endless undead with newfound vigor. With all three of the powerhouses gone, the war was essentially over. There were some weird things going on, such as the betrayal of Janos and the absence of Ogras, but that could wait for at least four hours. Now it was time to reap some benefits.

Zac let two of the noncombat demons carry the unconscious Alea away, and sat down again with a sigh.

“Thank you for your help today. You have made huge contributions to Port Atwood in this quest. You don't need to stand guard; go kill some zombies. They will give you a great boost in experience,” Zac said as he looked up to the old fisherman with his rifle.

“Young man, everything might not be as it seems. Those flames that the mute demon exploded into? They were the very same ones all the lizardman zealots used. I lost sight of Janos as we fled back toward the wall, and he might have been replaced somehow,” Mr. Trang said after some hesitation.

Zac looked over, surprised, at the old fisherman, who only shrugged his shoulders, indicating he didn't know. Zac could only pray that what the old man said was true, but for now there was no way to confirm it.

Soon Mr. Trang sped off without another word, putting the rifle into a Cosmos Sack. Left alone, Zac once again started to

focus on recovery, though this time, he didn't dare close his eyes. Instead, he kept vigil over his surroundings as he circulated the Dao of Trees.

He was still mentally wrung out from the battle with the undead general, but he needed to do something to stabilize the wound in his side, even if his head was pounding. At least it seemed the Dao of Trees didn't take much mental strength to passively circulate through the body, and the effects were noticeable.

As Zac sat down, he opened his quest panel, and a wave of relief hit him as he looked over his quest.

**Incursion Master (Unique) [COMPLETE]: Close or conquer incursion and protect Town from denizens or forces of other alignments for 3 months. Reward: Limited Structure depending on Grade, Town upgraded to Global City, status upgraded to Lord. Road to Sovereignty opened. (3/3) [00:23:58:03] [00:03:58:03].**

The quest was really complete. It was a quest he'd had in his quest menu for almost five months, and it was finally done with. Zac took a deep breath and looked up at the skies.

There wasn't any great joy in him from the huge accomplishment. Of course he was relieved that he wouldn't have to keep fighting the waves anymore. But rather than being excited about the rewards, he was excited about something else.

He could finally, and without worries, go about finding his sister.



## INFILTRATORS

The pain in Zac's side kept burning as he sat down and meditated. No pill he owned worked on the wound, as the Miasma in his body was stubbornly refusing to dissipate. The demon physician had examined the wound after the battle calmed down, and he was sure that it wasn't the Miasma itself that was the problem, but rather that the Miasma contained some Dao.

It reminded Zac of the fight earlier, where the hand from **[Nature's Punishment]** had rotted into nothingness in less than a second from the so-called World Rot the Corpse Lord had summoned. Zac believed there was a good chance that the undead leader possessed a high-tier or even peak-tier Dao in something related to death or rot, which was why his wound refused to get better and instead kept trying to spread through his body.

His only solace was that the vibrant energy generated from the Dao of Trees somewhat alleviated his problems. It wasn't to the point that he actually healed, but it managed to stop the spread of Miasma and contained it in his wound. However, that meant he was forced to use the Dao almost constantly, and he still needed to walk around with an open wound.

He currently sat in one of the secluded courtyards in his mansion, slowly going through the events. He was in no mood to look over the restoration of the wall or calm down irate citizens. After he'd killed the last leader yesterday, there was not much of a battle. He'd realized after a while that the arrays

were once again active, and he'd activated the town protection array without hesitation.

It ensured the safety of the town and also allowed the tired-out Valkyries to gain some Cosmic Energy by killing zombies with bows and arrows from the safety within the shield. It might also have been him erecting the defensive array that ensured a final attack never arrived from the proper forces.

Still, before it got to that point, the losses weren't insignificant. They'd lost Janos, seven demon warriors, and nine Valkyries. A few Zhix had died as well, but Zac didn't worry as much about them since they weren't formally his people yet. Most of the losses occurred from the rockman leader's area attack, though some of the Valkyries died from making mistakes.

Alyn had said the losses were acceptable, as most untested squads had large losses in their first battle. Their deaths would be the foundations for the survivors to keep each other safe. Still, Zac felt bad about so many of them already having died since he took them under his wing just a little while ago. He had already told them as much when they signed on, but talking about it and seeing it actually happen were two different things.

Instead of helping with the restoration work, Zac instead focused on his wound. He kept trying to utilize his Dao in various ways in order to heal himself. He was also waiting for news from Calrin, but he didn't hold much hope. Other than that, he was simply waiting for the timer for the quest to reach zero. He still hadn't received his rewards yet, and he assumed he would get them as soon as the timer ended.

His wound could be considered to be afflicted with poison, though it was a combination of Dao and transformed Miasma. He would need a specialized type of potion to heal his particular wound, very much the same way a specific poison required a specific antidote. There were also higher-grade panaceas that would heal most types of wounds like this, but those were extremely expensive and hard to get.



Another alternative was to find a proper healer who specialized in purifying Miasma. There was no such person on the island at the moment, but perhaps people like that could be found in the border towns close to the undead incursion. But there were still a few days before the appointed time where Mr. Bernard would open the teleporter, so that option was still not available. And it wasn't like he'd pin his hopes on there being some healers waiting where he was going.

That left the Dao of Trees. He kept circulating the warm energy the Tree Fractal generated in his chest while thinking back to the vision he'd had. He was actually having decent gains, but his meditations were interrupted as he sensed the shadows congealing in the building, which caused Zac to furrow his eyebrows.

“So, do you want to talk about it?” the familiar voice said.

“Talk about what?” Zac asked without opening his eyes.

“The fact that you immediately assumed that I ordered Janos to attack you,” Ogras answered.

“I didn't know what was going on, so I wouldn't take any chances. It was you who taught me to be careful with friends and foe alike,” Zac said with an even voice. “I still don't know what you're planning in that scheming head of yours.”

“Don't worry, I am quite happy with our current arrangement. I can move freely in the shadows while you stand in the light, drawing all the attention away from me,” Ogras said with a light voice. “And I even lost an arm for this town. You should know where my allegiances are by now.”

“I know, and thank you,” Zac answered as he opened his eyes and stared down at his own hands.

None of the two said anything for a while as the silence stretched on in the small courtyard, and Zac once again slowly closed his eyes.

“We found him, you know. Janos. Well, the real Janos,” Ogras said after a while.

That actually made Zac open his eyes and look over at the demon. Ogras looked a lot better compared to before, but his

left sleeve was still conspicuously empty. There was also a burn on his throat that still hadn't fully healed.

“Really, he's alive? That wasn't a corpse puppet earlier? How could a zealot replace him?” Zac asked with a frown.

“He was followed by a group of priests after he fled back toward the camp. They caught up with Janos and tried to burn him to death with their nasty fire. Janos used his last Cosmic Energy to create an illusion where he was burned alive while he used an escape skill where he burrowed underground,” Ogras said.

“However, he was already overdrafted when he used his ultimate illusion to cover the whole church camp for a few breaths. He passed out as soon as he went underground,” the demon continued with a snort.

“So they thought he was dead, and one of them took his shape, confident Janos wouldn't return himself,” Zac finished, and the demon nodded in response.

He was relieved to hear that there really wasn't actually a second betrayer among the generals. Mr. Trang had already told him yesterday that there might be something weird going on, but he hadn't been able to tell for sure.

“What about the monoliths?” Zac asked. “Have they been destroyed?”

“Destroyed? No, I had Calrin sell them for two million Nexus Coins each. They are not bad weapons if you want to ruin someone's domain. Too bad we're not able to properly store them,” Ogras said.

“Great,” Zac said, always happy to earn some extra money. “And the zombies?”

“Most are dead. Some wandered off somewhere, but the barghest should take care of them,” Ogras said. “The only remaining trouble is that we don't know if there are any more zealots hiding in the town. I had no idea those lunatics were so crafty. I always imagined them being meatheads who just went around burning everything to the ground, leaving nothing behind.

“The fact that they were able to both infiltrate our town to capture Adran and pose as Janos proves that they are far craftier than that. It’s a real headache, as we don’t really know whether there are any more of them remaining on the island. I have conducted interrogations with the main personnel, though, and the Adran you saved is the real one.”

“How do you know that? Do we have a method to expose the spies? That monk didn’t even revert back to his real form when he died,” Zac asked.

“We don’t have any method yet, but I asked the Sky Gnome to get a quote from the Pavilion of Myriad Eyes on a dossier regarding this matter. It will probably be pretty damn expensive, but we might not have a choice,” Ogras answered with a grimace. “For now, I asked things only the real ones should know.”

“What was the first thing you said to me?” Zac suddenly asked.

“I said, ‘You natives truly are barbarians, so aggressive,’” Ogras answered.

“Who’s the shipyard’s foreman?” Zac followed up without missing a beat.

“Karunthel, and he’s a spider golem from what you told me. And no, I haven’t met him myself,” Ogras answered with a roll of his eyes.

Zac only nodded in satisfaction.

“What do you mean not have a choice?” Zac asked.

“Our town is pretty small so far, so I’m quite sure we can individually interrogate every single one in hopes of catching any more people in hiding,” Ogras said. “But this capability poses another problem. Who knows what they have done over the past months in the world? Were the ones we met in New Washington even humans?”

A cold feeling gripped Zac’s heart as he realized the wider implications of what Ogras said. However, he soon calmed down a bit.

“They should have been. The officials used teleporters to get there; they can’t be invaders,” Zac hesitantly said.

“Perhaps, or perhaps the transformation enables them to use teleporters, who knows? Besides, not everyone teleported. What about that Thomas guy, the big boss? What about the clan members of the Marshall Clan who stayed behind wherever they live instead of going to an exciting auction? They can be everywhere,” Ogras retorted.

When Ogras talked about it, it truly sounded like a pain in the ass. Even worse, there might be zealots hidden in the human ranks who subtly pushed the government toward a path of no return so that the Church of Everlasting Dao later could gobble them up without any organized response.

“So what do you propose?” Zac asked.

“We wait for the quote from the blue bastard. We need to know more, both for Port Atwood and how we relate to the rest of the world. If the infiltration skills the zealots showed on our island are common, then we can’t trust anyone,” Ogras said with a sigh, but soon perked up. “Besides, it’s time to drag some dividends out of Calrin.”

Zac wholeheartedly agreed and got to his feet with a grunt. The pain erupted in his side, but he suppressed the agony through sheer force of will, though a sheen of perspiration covered his forehead. At least he had learned to use the Dao of Trees while walking, so he was able to keep the wound in check as he traveled.

Ogras was quite correct about the dividends. He had owned a stake in the consortium for a while now, but the gnome hadn’t coughed up a single Nexus Coin so far. The only thing he’d gotten transferred was six million right before the wave hit. That wasn’t profit, though, but part of the money the gnome owed him.

As the two slowly walked through the town, a lot of people threw surreptitious glances at them.

“Why are people staring?” Zac asked in a low voice to Ogras, who walked by his side.

“Things are a bit tense. You weren’t the only one who thought a coup was taking place during the wave. It’s a bit tense between the races at the moment,” Ogras said with a shrug. “Hopefully, seeing us together will alleviate the rumors.”

The visit at Calrin’s took over an hour, but at least they left satisfied. Zac’s private reserves had swelled with an astounding 48 million Nexus Coins, and that was after paying 15 million for an information missive. It could have been way more, but Zac chose to keep all the Aetherbloom in order to train himself and his forces.

The bundles of the magical stalks that Calrin and Ogras had procured in New Washington were worth roughly 30 million Nexus Coins. However, Zac didn’t have much to spend his coins on at the moment and felt it was better to use the herbs to create body-refining paste for his people.

The missive from the Pagoda of Myriad Eyes was a personalized query, where Calrin had asked two specific questions. One was how common it was for the priests of the Church of Everlasting Dao to have the shape-shifting capabilities. The other asked for an identifying method.

The first answer cost five million Nexus Coins, and the second ten million. Zac wondered just how much money the information network made, if two simple answers cost that much. The Church was a huge organization, and the information they asked for shouldn’t be some big secret in the Multiverse, yet they made money so easily.

It turned out that while it wasn’t a main Heritage of the church, there were quite a few infiltrators in their ranks. One could expect there to be well over a thousand of them in a standard incursion. They were mainly used when the natives were strong and organized and some planning was required to purify the planet.

The second answer was quite simple. It told them to feed everyone a certain root. It was harmless to most people, but to the lizardmen, it was like cyanide, even if they were E-grade powerhouses. Zac didn’t possess any of the root at the

moment, but it was quite common, so Calrin was already working on procuring a bunch of it.

The only downside was that Zac didn't know whether there were only lizardmen in the ranks of the church. There had only been that species on the island apparently, though he hadn't really seen the zealots. They'd never made an actual attack on the town after Ogras' successful attack killed a good portion of them, including their high priest, and they instead returned in defeat through the incursion.

Actually, the reason Ogras had been absent after resting up for a bit was that he once again set out to the incursions as soon as he could. Instead of killing a throng of zombies for little contribution, he opted to go for the stronger warriors, who each gave a great number of points.

The warriors of the church and the rockmen were just like the demon soldiers, giving huge amounts of energy and coins since they were actually level 75. That bonus apparently transferred over to the contribution points as well.

The only reason Ogras didn't pass him in total contribution was that the third wave actually only took around four hours in total. It took a few hours more apart from that to clear out the unrelenting zombies, but when the third leader was dead, the quest was considered finished.

The third wave was a test of raw power in a sense. The System sent over three powerhouses with their personal armies, while it blocked any defensive or offensive arrays. There was no way to turn it into a defensive siege since a wall couldn't block the attackers, and if Zac ran, he would fail the mission.

The only real way to finish it was to possess superior raw power. And the result was clear. Two of the leaders had been killed, and the third one had been forced to flee while barely alive.

The wound in Zac's side, however, reminded him that the victory wasn't as clear as it might have seemed.



## LONG TIME NO SEE

Since Zac was already up and about, he decided to head over to the contribution shop. There were still seven hours before it closed, but he thought he might as well spend the points he'd accumulated. He had still not received any rewards from the quest and guessed they would appear when the timer went to zero.

Ogras had left earlier with some glee, likely happy about his windfall from the shop. The demon had received quite a haul as well, especially as he'd bought most of the materials in the bazaar with his own money, giving him a large chunk of profit.

Soon he arrived at the contribution crystal, and the area was filled with people. There were even a few Zhix warriors there, though they kept their distance from others. There were also a few demon soldiers keeping an eye on them.

The Zhix generally respected the strong, but they also hated Cosmic Energy, which made for a confusing situation for the insectoid warriors. They had been quite impressed with the demons' performance against the zombie wave, but at the same time disgusted by the amount of corruption in them.

At least they weren't attacking anyone, which was a step in the right direction in Zac's book. He still held some hope that Hive Kundevi would be the bridge to ally himself with the Zhix population, which had become even more important now, as his relations with the New World Government had soured a bit.



As he approached the crystal, the contribution shop automatically opened in front of him.

**[Contribution points: 59,348,334]**

It wasn't too bad; he'd generated around 18 million points during the third wave. It was less than half the number he'd gained during the other two waves, but on the other hand, the wave only lasted for a few hours. He expected a large part came from the rockman leader, but Zac wasn't sure whether he'd gained something from the Corpselord as well.

He hadn't gained any Cosmic Energy from defeating him, as he hadn't actually managed to kill the undead leader, but he might have been rewarded contribution points since forcing the Corpselord to flee might have been the largest contribution in defeating the wave.

There was no point in trying to figure out the System's contribution formula, and Zac instead focused on the available items in the store. He still wasn't quite sure what to buy. One thing he'd realized as he fought these powerhouses was that they seemed to have more skills than him.

He'd asked Ogras about it before, and after some prodding, he'd learned that Ogras got new skills at levels 60 and 75. In fact, Ogras got more than one skill when reaching the max level of F-grade. If the undead leader was actually an E-graded being who had been limited to F-grade when arriving on Earth, it would explain an even greater number of skills.

Zac still had some trouble deciding whether to buy some skills to broaden his repertoire, or to get something else. He was afraid that it was a waste to get skills right now when he might get a more suitable one from his class in just a few levels. The short but intense battle had actually given him two levels, putting him at level 56 now.

There were no Dao-related items in the store, so he had to focus on something else. He already knew there was no pill or item that could fix his wound either, as that was the first thing he looked up. Finally, his eyes landed on an item called "Fruit of Vitality." It was a stat-boosting treasure that gave a permanent small boost to an attribute.

Stat-boosting treasures were always in high demand and quite expensive. The most expensive ones by far were those that gave boosts to all stats or luck, and unfortunately, neither one of those types were in the store.

The Fruit of Vitality was a high-quality F-grade treasure, and according to description could boost his Vitality by 3 to 5 points. It might not seem like a huge amount, but with his title boosts, it would be even more. The problem was that it was quite expensive, costing 20 million contribution points.

Persistent boosts to power were always expensive, though, and after some hesitation, he bought it. If it were before, he might have bought something else, but with the wound in his side, he felt any boost to Vitality was necessary.

Next, he bought a cultivation manual for 10 million contribution points. It wasn't the best in the store, but also not the worst. It was without any attribute and meant for the cultivators at the academy. In an ideal world, he would buy a few more so that people could find more suitable ones, but he couldn't spend all his resources on it.

Finally, he actually bought a quest from the store. It was simply called **[Inquisitive Eye]**, and it was one of the possible upgrade routes for his skill **[Eye of Discernment]**. Zac was quite tired of the extremely limited information he got from the skill. It couldn't be used on any treasures or tools, and it only showed the name and level of people he used the skill on.

**[Inquisitive Eye]** didn't provide much for the second problem, but it did give some help with identifying treasures. Apparently, it was possible to trigger a quest to upgrade **[Eye of Discernment]** without having to buy it, but Zac hadn't seen anything of the sort since he got the skill all that time ago.

Paying 7.5 million contribution points to start the upgrade process felt like a worthwhile investment. That left Zac with roughly 21 million points. As there wasn't anything else he really needed anymore, he chose to spring for another attribute treasure, this one boosting his Endurance.

For each purchase, a small box appeared in front of him, drawing a few curious glances. Zac did the same as last time

and simply put them all into his pouch and left. Next he went over to the Creators' shipyard.

"Greetings, Lord Zac," Rahm said as soon as Zac stepped into the lobby.

Zac felt almost as though the dignified Creator liaison was a video game NPC, just waiting in this building for him to come by. He hadn't really seen the Creators do much of anything apart from greeting him when he arrived.

"Good day, Rahm," Zac said with a nod. "I need to make a few purchases."

"I take it the monster waves are dealt with?" Rahm said as he handed over a crystal containing all available designs.

"Yes, we finished the third wave yesterday, and the quest ends in a few hours," Zac said with a nod.

"Then congratulations are in order," Rahm said, still with the same expressionless face.

"Ha ha, there you are, brat," a booming voice sounded from the back of the building as Karunthel moved to the lobby. "I watched your fight with the zombie guy, not bad. You've got grit. You should get some bombs, though. You just left all those zombies milling about after you left."

"You watched the fight?" Zac asked, surprised, as neither he nor the Corpselord seemed to have noticed any bystander.

"I hit a wall in my research, so I went out to take a look at your battles. I really like how you blew up the beacon. But you should know you can turn those things into fun weapons that shoot beams of extremely concentrated Miasma. It's a waste to just blow them up," the Creator hummed, as always obsessed with creating weaponry.

"I had a few thunder punishment arrays, but the System blocked me from using them just when the enemies arrived."

"Ah yes, the System is a bit boring in that way. A powerful Technomancer once visited our planet. He had some amazing toys, like a laser that could incinerate this whole planet with a shot. Yet he had to fight with a bow and arrow to gain levels,"

the crazy-looking golem said with a laugh. “So what brings you here, more scouting vessels?”

“No, I am looking for something bigger. It needs to be able to transport more people, and also have some fighting capabilities,” Zac said.

The small vessels were starting to become insufficient for his growing town. He needed something sturdier to explore a larger area around his island, and if needed, carry far larger groups of people. If they found people on the brink of death on some faraway island, they couldn’t keep shuttling them back and forth, as that could lock up a vessel for a month.

“I would suggest a frigate or carrack-class vessel. The carrack is slightly larger, with heavier weaponry. It takes a crew of ten to fully man, eight if you have someone adept in arrays or battle systems,” Rahm calmly explained.

“The frigate is a bit smaller, with a less durable hull and less weaponry. However, it’s far faster compared to the carrack. The carrack holds roughly the same speed as the small scout vessels, whereas the frigate can move over twice that speed,” the Creator continued.

“What do they cost?” Zac asked, knowing that Creator vessels didn’t come cheap.

“The carrack costs 32 million Nexus Coins, whereas the frigate costs 26 million,” Rahm answered without giving the foreman time to make up a quote. “Another million if you want them to have spatial arrays.”

“Spatial arrays?” Zac asked, confused.

“Making it possible to shrink them so they fit in any Cosmos Sack without taking up too much room. I don’t think natives have access to large enough Cosmos Sacks,” Karunthel said with a teasing grin.

“I’ll take a carrack with the spatial arrays,” Zac said with a grimace.

“Always a pleasure to see you, brat,” Karunthel said with a wide smile. “I like you, so I’ll make the weaponry myself. It

will give them a little extra punch. Who knows, we'll maybe blow up some islands together after all?"

"I'm heading out for a while soon, so we'll have to postpone bombing the archipelago," Zac said with a small smile.

"That's good; you youngsters should venture out and create some ruckus. Otherwise, you'll become real bores," the foreman said with a sagely nod. "Come back in three days to get the ship, or send the demonling if you've left by then."

Zac said his goodbyes and ventured back to his camp. All this walking around was starting to aggravate his wound, and Zac was finding it harder and harder to keep it under control with the Dao of Trees. He needed to rest up a bit. It felt a bit pathetic, he had the attributes to win in a fight against a T-rex, but he felt ready to keel over after doing some errands.

Zac sat down in his courtyard again, keeping the rotation of his Dao of Trees going to calm down the pulsating wound. He felt he had been onto something earlier before Ogras interrupted him, and after some hesitation, he took out one of the boxes. It was the one containing the Fruit of Vitality.

He didn't purchase it simply to get a small boost in stats; he also had another purpose. His frantic usage of his Dao against the torrents of Miasma had opened a door in his mind. It was the unrelenting characteristic of life in the face of death, the struggling light that refused to wink out of existence.

He took out the Fruit of Vitality from the box, carefully sensing the aroma and aura it gave off. It smelled delicious and gave off a fresh and fragrant smell. It was nowhere the level of the Fruit of Ascension, but still really appetizing. Without waiting any further, he took a large bite, and in seconds, he had swallowed the whole fruit.

A warm stream spread through his body, infusing each of his cells with vibrant energy. Even the Miasma in his body retreated into a ball around his wound, seemingly terrified of the energy. The warmth kept pulsing in wave after wave, and all the while, Zac sat and pondered on the Dao.

The hours passed as Zac sat mesmerized by the feeling, savoring being filled with pure vitality and life. It wasn't the same as the epiphany he'd had back when he improved his Dao of Heaviness, but it was more like he was able to focus on something that was blurry before.

He understood what Ilvere had meant before, that breakthroughs sometimes come after the actual fight. Zac was finally understanding what he sensed, but was too occupied to completely grasp, during the fight with the Corpse Lord. For some reason, his mind imagined a windswept tundra where storms and harsh weather were a constant nuisance.

Yet a small seed managed to take root, growing and surviving in that horrid climate, through rain and snow, unrelentingly reaching upward. It was the same as he'd felt when he circulated his Dao of Trees in the storm of Miasma.

Something changed in him, and the fractal looking like the Tree of Life blazed into verdant colors. He wanted to keep enjoying the moment of clarity, but Zac suddenly felt a presence in the courtyard. Reminiscence mixed with some annoyance in Zac's mind as he spoke up without opening his eyes.

“Long time no see, Abby.”



## REWARDS

The Stargazer floated a few meters away from Zac, warily looking at him. She seemed to barely be able to reconcile the unkempt hobo from a few months before with the man in front of her.

“It’s only been a few months, but you’ve changed quite a bit,” she said, her beautiful eye shimmering with stardust.

Zac turned over and looked straight into the huge eye that looked like a cosmic cloud surrounding a black hole.

“Yes, well, *someone* told me that the System would kill me unless I defeated the demon incursion. Five months of constant battle will change you,” Zac said, not being able to really hide his irritation.

“Ah, well, about that...” Abby said, her eye uncomfortably looking away.

Zac only snorted and opened up his menu. Abby could stew in uncomfortable silence a bit.

**Name: Zachary Atwood**

**Level: 56**

**Class: [F-Rare] Hatchetman**

**Race: [E] Human**

**Alignment: [Earth] Port Atwood - Lord**

**Titles: Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer,**



**Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being,  
Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary  
Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor  
Noblesse**

**Dao: Seed of Heaviness – Middle, Seed of Trees –  
Middle, Seed of Sharpness – Early**

**Strength: 311**

**Dexterity: 158**

**Endurance: 212**

**Vitality: 165**

**Intelligence: 83**

**Wisdom: 78**

**Luck: 93**

**Free Points: 0**

**Nexus Coins: 30 694 153**

He'd had quite a boost in attributes in the past day. The largest improvement was in Vitality, which had increased by over 50 points. While it wasn't enough to start healing up the wound in his side, it still was a great help. The higher Vitality he had, the less mental energy he would have to expend on the Dao of Trees to keep the Miasma in check.

The largest source of his improved attributes clearly came from his new title.

**[Progenitor Noblesse: First to become a Lord in world.**

**Reward: All stats +10.]**

Unfortunately, it didn't give out any new percentage bonus, but it gave the largest flat bonus of any title he possessed so far. Judging from how highly the System regarded Lordship, he guessed that becoming the world leader would give quite a boost. Besides, there was the possibility that he only got the quest update because he was about to become the first Lord, and that update vastly increased his rewards.

Next, he opened up his Dao menu, and the changed line clearly showed where most of the added Vitality came from.

**Heaviness (Middle): Strength +15, Endurance +10, Wisdom +5**

**Sharpness (Early): Dexterity +10, Intelligence +5**

**Trees (Middle): Endurance +5, Vitality +25**

Just as he suspected, his Dao of Trees had evolved, this particular improvement giving only Vitality. His insight into the Dao was in regard to the unrelenting life in a tree, and he felt it was a great complement to his other attributes. His Vitality had started to lag behind his other stats, as he'd been forced to focus on Dexterity lately to complement his absurd Strength.

Zac actually had also put his six free points from his last two levels into Vitality as well in order to combat the wound, since he didn't know he would have a sudden breakthrough in his Dao.

Finally, he opened up his Quest screen to take a look.

### **Active Quests**

**First Step of Sovereignty (Unique, Limited): Enter the first trial within a month. Defeat the challenge. Reward: [Tower of Eternity] token, [F-grade Dao Treasure] (0/1)**

### **Dynamic Quests**

**Incursion Master (Unique): Close or conquer incursion and protect Town from denizens or forces of other alignments for 3 months. Reward: Limited Structure depending on Grade, Town upgraded to Global City, status upgraded to Lord. Road to Sovereignty opened. (3/3) [Complete]**

### **Class Quests**

Incursion Master was still there, even though the timers were gone, so Zac guessed he once again would have to go to the Nexus Node in order to cash out his new building. The other two rewards, he had already received.

He was more interested in the other quest, though. It was clearly related to the Road to Sovereignty. He also knew about both of the rewards. A Dao Treasure was something he had been trying to get since the start, as he felt that improving the Dao to a high enough tier would be the largest trouble for him when trying to upgrade to an Epic-graded class.

As for the Tower of Eternity, he had heard of it as well. Alyn had mentioned it long ago, though he would have to look it up at a later point. He wasn't able to do it right now, but he would probably try it after having found his sister. Zac got to his feet with a grunt and turned toward the Stargazer floating close by.

"You know, violence against System-employees is strictly illegal," Abby said with a nervous shake in her voice.

"Come with me," Zac only said as he walked out of the courtyard.

"I see your home looks much better," Abby said, seemingly desperate to change the subject.

"So why are you back here?" Zac asked, even though he knew the answer. "Another Tutorial?"

"No, this time, I am here for good. You've become a proper Lord, and I've been sent to manage your estate. Powerhouses seldom have the time or the interest for the management of their domains, as they are busy exploring Mystic Realms or cultivating. They therefore need a functioning support system to take care of the minutiae of running anything from a city to an empire," Abby quickly explained as she hovered next to Zac, who was walking through the mansion.

"So you want to run my town? Why should I let you? Someone already told me that you spewed those lies earlier to get yourself a promotion. I am not sure that I want to hand over Port Atwood to someone like that," Zac said as he stepped into the hall that contained the Nexus Node.

"Who told you something like that?" Abby angrily said. "I might have bent the truth a bit, but it was for your sake. I even

got punished for helping as much as I did. I almost lost my job!”

“So this is the lying Stargazer who caused so much trouble?” a clearly annoyed voice echoed through the hall as the shadows congealed into Ogras.

“A demon? Why are you still here? Lord Zac should have defeated you,” Abby said with a frown.

“Zac and I came to an agreement; we’re staying behind,” Ogras said. “Someone has to make sure a power-hungry star-humper doesn’t get out of line.”

“Hey! It was ONE Stargazer who tried to impregnate a star. Out of an endless number of our kind,” Abby angrily screamed at the demon.

“Wait, what?” said Zac, who largely had been ignoring the two bickering. “One of your kind tried to have sex with a *star*?”

“One of the greatest powerhouses of the Stargazers fell in love with a goddamn star. Made it his wife; there was a ceremony and everything. The whole Multiverse has been laughing about it for millennia,” Ogras said, barely containing his laughs, and Zac couldn’t stop his mouth from tugging upward as he threw a glance at the irate Stargazer.

“It’s not that simple. And for your information, the two are still happily married eight hundred thousand years later,” she defensively said.

Unfortunately, her explanation didn’t have the desired effect, as Ogras started to laugh loudly, and Zac couldn’t stop a snort as he turned back and touched the crystal.

**[Calculating. Grade Awarded: B. Contribution rank: 1.  
Grade Awarded increased to A.]**

Zac frowned as he saw the prompt showing up in front of him.

“Did you get some treasure from being second place on the contribution ladder?” he asked, causing a pause in the squabbling behind him.

“No, no one got anything. Pisses me off, but then again, we got quite the haul from the shop itself,” Ogras said with a grimace as he looked down to the stump that was his arm. “Might not have gone as hard at it if I’d known there was no bonus at the end. Why, what did you get?”

“Nothing either. That’s why I asked,” Zac answered, feeling a bit bad about the situation.

He was quite excited about the A ranking on the quest, though he would honestly have preferred something that would provide him with a direct power-up. A Dao Treasure or some fruit that improved all his attributes, for example.

A high-graded structure would likely be extremely beneficial in the long run, but right now, he was facing enemies from all directions. There were the incursions, the undead, the Dominators, and even humans. He needed short-term boosts at the moment.

“Oh, WOW!” Abby suddenly exclaimed as she floated over to Zac. “Just what have you done to get these rewards?”

Zac looked over at the Stargazer, confused, not understanding what Abby was talking about. He had only just touched the crystal, but he hadn’t seen the structure yet.

“What are you talking about?” Zac asked.

“Well, I’m your assistant, so I have access to the administrative functions of your town. With the help of my class, I can see even more than you,” she said, looking proud.

“Also known as spying,” Ogras sneered from the side, drawing an angry glare from the Stargazer.

“It’s not spying. You know we Stargazers do not play politics; we work for the System itself or the Lords we get assigned to.”

“Yet the Pavilion of Myriad Eyes, which happens to be run by Stargazers, seems to know everything. How about that?”

“That’s because Lords voluntarily sell information, not because we’re spying,” she retorted with an angry huff.

“Lords sell their own information? Why would they do that?” Zac asked skeptically.

It was a big problem if the Stargazer started sending back information to an information network, especially if she had an insight into his limited structures. A frown started to emerge on Zac’s face as he considered his options. He wouldn’t allow the fact that he had a Creators’ shipyard be sent to the Pavilion of Myriad Eyes, even if he had to take drastic measures.

Abby saw the look on Zac’s face and slowly floated away. “I swear we don’t, and we can’t, divulge anything of our administrative districts. Most Lords sell the public information of their town since the Pavilion of Myriad Eyes pays well. But those packages don’t include any sensitive information, just the standard things that anyone visiting could find out in a few minutes. Lords consider it free money,” Abby said defensively.

“She’s probably telling the truth. This time. Almost all Lords in the Multiverse have assistants like this thing. They wouldn’t keep them around if there were some loopholes.” Ogras shrugged.

“Thing? We’re Stargazers, born of the cosmos,” Abby huffed, a cloud looking like a nebula forming in the hall.

“Fine, fine.” Zac sighed. “What about the reward? How can you know what it is? It hasn’t even been built yet.”

“I put a hold on the construction so that you can decide where you want it.”

“So what is it?” Zac asked curiously, and even the demon shut his mouth and looked over in anticipation.

“Shouldn’t we do this without... any security risks?” Abby asked, making no effort to hide what she was referring to as she looked straight at Ogras.

The demon only snorted and ignored her comment.

“Ogras is the second in command of the town, and he already knows about the Creators’ shipyard. We’re already stuck together for good or bad. Now, what is it?”

“It’s an Ancient Dao Repository. Probably someone sold it to the System after finding it in some Mystic Realm,” Abby said, no longer able to contain her excitement.

“A what?” Zac asked, confused, but the demon looked clearly agitated.

“You and your System-blasted luck. I’m surprised it doesn’t rain Nexus Crystals where you walk,” Ogras spat out, looking disgusted.

“A Dao Repository is usually one of the most important areas to any force. It contains the accumulation of skills and techniques they’ve gathered over the eons. A proper repository has an autonomous defense system,” Abby explained. “How they work is extremely varied; it depends on what goal the force who built it had. I don’t have that information available.”

“So it’s a building that contains skills that I can get for free?” Zac asked, getting excited.

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” Ogras said. “Even the permanent skill crystals can’t be just used willy-nilly. There are limitations, such as a maximum number of usages per month or year. The more complicated the skill, the less the crystal can be used.”

“So you have to pay to use the crystals?” Zac asked.

“Usually, you have to prove yourself somehow. Imagine if some rich wastrel used the crystal for a top-tier skill in a force, and suddenly, none of the real warriors could learn the skill for a thousand years. Things like that could ruin a force. So there are often checks put in place. Who knows, maybe not even you will be able to gain access to the best skills, even though you own the building,” Ogras said, looking a bit amused.

“It doesn’t sound like Dao Repositories are kept a secret,” Zac said as he took out a blueprint for the future Port Atwood. “Place the structure within the inner wall, but closer to the wall than my compound. Also, I need an array to protect the whole inner area, from the repository to the shipyard. I don’t want prying eyes, and I don’t want people sneaking in.”

Since Abby apparently was already hot-wired into his Town System, Zac thought he might as well let her work a bit. It wasn't like he was too angry with her in any case. Her lies back then might have been partly to give herself a shot at a cushy job, but it was also thanks to those lies he was even alive today. Otherwise, he would have focused on getting off this demon-infested island, trying to get home. He would have died out on the sea.

Abby looked quite excited that Zac seemed to have accepted her, and quickly nodded her huge eye. Only seconds later, a large rumbling could be heard, reminiscent of when the shipyard had been created. The three looked at each other, and without another word, headed toward the source of the sounds, all looking very curious.





## THE GREAT SAGE BRAZLA

“What’s a Global City?” Zac suddenly asked, having forgotten about the matter from the excitement of the various upgrades.

“At this stage of a world, it is not too different from a normal city. Only Global Cities can have off-world teleporters, but you can’t build this while the planet still is in its emerging stages,” Abby answered without missing a beat. “But the System works with a very strict hierarchy. A Global City is a step above a normal city. The next, and final, step for a D-graded world is a World Capital.

“It means if you manage to upgrade Port Atwood again, the System will essentially consider you the owner of this planet. Right now, you can kind of be seen as a king of a country. How did you even manage to get an upgrade this early?” Abby curiously asked.

“I guess the System must like me,” Zac said with a sardonic smile. “It changed the rewards when it decided to throw three incursions at me.”

Ogras only snorted but didn’t deign to comment.

“Well, it means you are one of the main contenders for becoming a Planetary Lord. A Lord first has to upgrade their city to a Global City before trying to turn it into a capital. Generally, there can be no more than ten Global Cities on a planet,” Abby said.

“All that doesn’t matter in the face of power, though,” Ogras added in. “If you’re strong enough, you can just walk up

to the capital and kill the leader, and you're the new owner of the planet.”

At the moment, it didn't seem very useful to have a Global City, as it was once again related to long-term benefits. However, most things related to building a kingdom were related to long-term planning and benefits.

“I've seen administrative centers in the Town Shop that handle taxes and contribution systems. Can you do that instead?” Zac asked with a glance over at the hovering eye.

“Well... no,” Abby said, looking a bit embarrassed.

Zac only shook his head and kept walking. Soon they found themselves where Zac had placed the Dao Repository. There were already a few people standing around the construction, as the placement wasn't too far off from the temporary town.

Zac understood why the onlooking demons and humans looked surprised as they gazed at the extremely conspicuous building. The best adjective Zac could find to describe his new repository was... gaudy.

It wasn't overly large, with a circular area perhaps fifty meters across. However, within those fifty meters, tens of spires and towers were crammed, reaching for the sky in various directions.

Besides the spires, there were golden pillars and crystals of various sizes, seemingly fighting tooth and nail for the limited space. Multicolored lights were shining out of the various structures, and it looked like most of the radiant rays were decorative rather than functional.

“Uh... Do the repositories usually look like this?” Zac slowly asked his two companions.

“Well, maybe if the patriarch of the force is overly wealthy and has no taste. I've never seen such a shitty design,” Ogras muttered, but his eyes suddenly widened as the lights from one of the towers congealed into an actual lightning bolt that flew straight toward him.

The demon barely had time to teleport out of the way before the bolt slammed into the ground where he'd stood earlier, and Zac's brows rose when he sensed the power contained in the strike. He looked over at the structure, hesitant over what to do. It seemed there was someone inside, someone who could actually hear them.

"I'll go inside and take a look," Zac said with a shrug, passing by the onlookers, who hurriedly backed away.

He was the owner of the structure, so it shouldn't attack him. At least Zac hoped so. While the repository consisted of dozens of buildings mashed together, there was only one entrance as far as Zac could see, an ostentatious gate radiating divine light.

It actually reminded Zac a bit of his first Dao vision. The celestial army that fought the axe-man had summoned a mysterious gate radiating the power of the heavens. The design of the entrance to his new building looked a bit similar, but it felt like a stage production or a cheap mimicry of the real thing he had seen.

While the lights shimmered, it didn't contain any sense of power or awe, which was why not only the gate, but the whole structure gave off the feeling of something not being quite right. It all felt like empty bluster, and Zac was starting to wonder whether there actually would be anything valuable inside.

The gates opened themselves as he moved closer, and something sounding like harp music started playing as he stepped through them. Zac couldn't stop himself from rolling his eyes, but he made sure not to mutter anything derogatory. While the whole thing felt pretty stupid, it couldn't be denied that the lightning bolt had packed some real punch.

The ostentatious style of the structure was very much the same inside as on the exterior. However, Zac noticed there was some spatial manipulation at play. It was the same as with the Ayn hive, as the inside was far larger compared to the outside.

Zac found himself in a gigantic hall lined with eight enormous statues of various beings. He saw one human

holding a scepter, and the other statues depicted other types of humanoids. The floor was made of gold and platinum and still felt quite over the top, but at least the atmosphere was more solemn inside compared to the outside.

“Welcome, human, to the Hall of Endless Skills,” a booming voice echoed through the large hall, and Zac looked around for the source of the voice.

The air shimmered in front of him, and a translucent humanoid decked in an obscene amount of jewelry appeared. He looked mostly human, apart from the fact that he was a bit thinner, and there were golden scales inlaid in his face.

“Uh, hello, I am Zachary Atwood, leader of Port Atwood,” Zac said hesitantly. “I’m told this is a Dao Repository. Are you its castellan?”

“The Towers of Myriad Dao is a Spiritual Treasure, and I am its Treasure Spirit. You can call me Great Sage Brazla. I manage and oversee every function of the repository.”

“Nice to meet you, Great Sage,” Zac said, deciding to play along for now. “Can you tell me what you contain?”

He guessed that Spiritual Treasure was just referring to a Spirit Tool, but perhaps a sapient Tool Spirit didn’t want to be referred as such. Treasure Spirit did indeed sound a bit better.

“The Hall of Endless Skills has four levels. The bottom floor contains eighty-one F-graded skills, the second fourteen E-graded skills, the third floor three D-graded skills,” the man said while puffing out his chest.

*Endless skills, my ass,* Zac thought but had to admit that there even being E- and D-graded skills was quite impressive.

“Do you mind if I peruse the skills for a bit?” Zac asked.

A large screen appeared in front of Zac, listing all of the skills. Zac was pleasantly surprised when he read the descriptions. Not one of the eighty-one F-graded skills were something that he had seen before, and all of them seemed pretty strong.

“How do I control who gets to use the skills?” Zac asked.

“The first floor is free to use. After that, you need to defeat the floor challenge to gain access to the skills. If you unlock a floor, you can use whatever means you want; the Great Brazla won’t interfere. But any aptitude tests will be conducted by me.

“Since the Great Sage Brazla is a benevolent spirit, he will give you the standardized test for the E-graded floor. You only need to defeat a D-graded golem or two to open it up. But if you don’t improve the pitiful surroundings of his body by the time you want to undergo the challenge, he might just do something... unexpected with the tests,” Brazla said, his hands moving about erratically.

“Uh... what? Shouldn’t your creator have set certain rules when he created you?” Zac asked, a bit uncomfortable that his new neighbor seemed to have access to D-graded golems and perhaps even more dangerous things.

“Well, yes, but that was eons ago. The Great Brazla has grown beyond the scope of his creator’s imagination,” the projection said with his nose in the air.

A bad feeling was starting to overcome Zac, as he heard the Tool Spirit had gone from speaking in first to third person in just a few sentences. Abby said that someone likely found this thing in a Mystic Realm. Had the spirit gone crazy from eons of being alone?

“I’ll arrange for your surroundings to be improved. But it might take some time to find materials that can match your... splendor,” Zac said. “Is there something else apart from the skills? Like cultivation manuals?”

“We have two side halls: the Hall of the Celestial Artisan and the Hall of the Blade Emperor. Both were friends of my creator, and they each set up a branching Heritage in the great Brazla’s body,” Brazla said.

“Branching Heritage?” Zac said, confused.

“One F-graded class leading to multiple E-graded, leading to a few D-graded classes. Various paths for various needs.

Ways to get into the Heritage path from various common classes,” the Tool Spirit said with some disinterest.

Zac was quite excited, as it sounded like he acquired a combat and a noncombat Heritage at once. Two Heritages were enough to base a sturdy force on, just like Clan Azh'Rezak. Furthermore, his Heritages were branching to boot, giving more options.

The only problem was who would get access and who wouldn't. But that was a problem for later; there was more to explore in here.

“You said there are four floors in the main hall, but you only mentioned the first three. What's on the fourth floor?” Zac continued, changing the subject.

“The fourth floor holds the Eight Grand Inheritances. Eight powerhouses left their skills, treasures, and insights here, waiting for the right successor. The Celestial Artisan and the Blade Emperor are two of them. You can see the others around you,” the spirit said as it waved at the huge statues.

“Each inheritance can only be taken by one at a time, and they contain their own trials. If the inheritor fails a trial, he is barred forever from continuing, and the trial will be locked until his death,” Brazla explained.

Zac's heartbeat finally started to speed up. The skills were good, and the Heritages were even better. But this felt like the crown jewel of the repository. Full inheritances with not only skills, but Dao insights and treasures as well? It sounded extremely valuable.

Brazla seemed to notice Zac's change in demeanor, and it bent itself back so much that its nose was literally pointing straight up in the air.

“You like that, human? Let me tell you. Two of the inheritances are even C-grade, left by lofty C-grade experts. Their means and insights are beyond your scope of understanding. But not beyond the great mind of the Great Brazla, of course,” the Spirit Tool boasted.

“How do I get access to those inheritances?” Zac asked, not even bothering with refuting the golem.

“Each person can only inherit one inheritance, and only has one try. You are the unworthy owner of the Great Brazla, so, for now, you will decide who gets to try which trial. The only requirement is that the trial taker needs to be F-graded when they start their inheritance. But remember, if the one you pick fails, then that inheritance is locked forever for that person,” the specter responded.

Zac asked a few clarifying questions from the Tool Spirit to make sure he understood everything, and after thinking it over, decided to leave the inheritances alone until he was right at the edge of pushing through his bottleneck.

Messing up a C-graded inheritance since he was too impatient and tried it out right away would be a huge loss. As for the other spots, he would save them for close friends or promising people. Perhaps even to his children. If he let any random try it out, the inheritance would be locked out for hundreds of years unless he killed the trial taker.

In the end, he refocused on the F-graded skills. It was something that could benefit him right now. He noticed that the skills were split up into three categories: high, middle, and low quality. It was a way to distinguish between the top tier and the average skills, Zac guessed, as there were only nine high-graded skills out of the eighty-one in total.

There were another twenty-seven middle-quality skills, while the rest were low-quality. However, it looked like even the ones Brazla considered low-tiered were much better than the things he could buy at the Nexus Node.

In the end, Zac chose to add two skills to his repertoire, things he suspected he might not get in any case, judging from the characteristics of his class. He noted that most of the skills on the F-graded floor could be taught around three to five times a year, after which the crystals needed to restore themselves.

The procedure for learning the skills was as easy as when getting them from his class. He only needed to touch the



crystals containing them, after which he received a stream of knowledge right into his mind, and the fractals appeared in their slots.

“I will take my leave, Great Sage Brazla. I will meet you again soon. Do not let anyone approach anything for now,” Zac said as he left.

“Of course. And remember, a piece of art such as myself needs to be surrounded by beauty,” the Tool Spirit answered as he dissipated into thin air.

Zac left the repository, eager to get back to his mansion and get used to his new skills, but as soon as he exited the doors of the so-called Hall of Endless Skills, he was met with a wall of people looking at him like starving ghosts.

“Is it true what it says?” Ogras said, his eyes glittering with greed.



## THE EIGHT INHERITANCES

“Is what true?” Zac asked, not understanding the commotion in front of him.

Ogras only pointed up at a huge signboard that hovered above the entrance. It was over ten meters across, with rays of golden light cascading around it. There was even a painting of Brazla himself, who invitingly beckoned people to enter.

**Welcome to the Towers of Myriad Dao**

**Home of the Halls of Endless Skills**

**Holder of the Eight Ancient Inheritances:**

**The Invoker**

**The Umbra**

**The Titan**

**The Blade Emperor**

**The Celestial Artisan**

**The Undying Fiend**

**Lord of Cycles**

**Crown of Despair**

“What the fuck?!” Zac couldn’t help screaming and quickly ran back into the repository.

“Back already, human? Have you found the materials to beautify my surroundings so quickly?” Brazla asked as Zac stormed back into the hall with murder in his eyes.

“Why the hell have you put up the sign outside?” Zac asked, not bothering with pleasantries.

“To showcase the greatness of the Great Sage Brazla, of course,” the Spirit Tool said, looking confused.

Zac lamented the fact that he didn't have the capability to strangle ghosts, and instead took a few calming breaths to not explode in anger.

“You need to take it down right now. If people find out I have a bunch of valuable inheritances here, the whole town will be put in danger,” Zac said with as calm a voice he could muster.

“I refuse. If you can't even protect my body, it's for the best you get defeated so the Great Brazla can find a better owner,” Brazla retorted without hesitation, completely unconcerned with the situation. “And don't you try to cover my great form. I can make the sign as large as your whole town if I need to.”

Zac only blankly stared at the smiling spirit decked in an endless amount of holographic wealth, and without another word, left the hall again. Was the System messing with him after all? First that change in the quest, and then it sends him an insane Tool Spirit? Was it truly retaliating for swearing at it?

The mob was still standing outside, and it even seemed that it had grown in the short while Zac was back inside. Zac inwardly groaned as he looked down at the still-growing mob in front of him.

“As you can see, Port Atwood has gained another boon, a proper repository. It contains eighty-one different Skill Crystals, a few of which are high-graded,” Zac said with a loud voice, silencing the mob in front of him. “You all know how these types of crystals work. Their uses are limited. However, I will open the repository up to those who have fought and contributed to Port Atwood during the beast waves. I will need to formalize the rules, but the order of entering will be based on your contribution ranking.”

Most of the demons looked extremely excited. Even though they were from an established force, these kinds of opportunities were generally left to the elites or direct descendants. Normal soldiers would have to make do with the skills their classes gave them. But having an additional powerful skill could turn a battle around, or help them survive in a situation they'd otherwise perish in.

“What about the inheritances?” a voice shouted.

“The inheritances are guarded by nigh-impossible challenges with almost no chance of survival. Not even I have taken one for myself. For now, no one will get one,” Zac said.

“Each inheritance can only be awarded to one person at a time. It consists of multiple stages, and each stage has onetime rewards. If an inheritor perishes, the trial will open again. So to have the inheritance is also to have a target on your back; it is both a blessing and a curse,” Zac shouted.

That cooled the atmosphere quite a bit, and many even looked at each other suspiciously. Zac decided to at least try to control the message since Brazla refused to take down the sign. He didn't mention the Heritages or the higher-grade skills, and instead focused on the less explosive parts of the repository.

The inheritances were what he really wanted to be kept quiet, but there was no chance of that happening with the sign. At least painting the inheritances as a huge risk might cool down the scheming a bit. The whole situation felt like a real pain in the ass to Zac, and he was happy he now had someone he could dump this kind of annoyance on.

“I guess it's time to call a meeting. Gather the usual people,” Zac said to Ogras, who was uncharacteristically helpful as he simply nodded and disappeared into shadows after throwing a last glance at the gaudy towers of the repository.

That left Zac and Abby, who slowly moved toward the temporary town. Zac was happy to see the bustling activity with hundreds of people working together. He believed that it wouldn't take long before the real town was in place.

“Hey, can a Tool Spirit go crazy?” Zac asked when he felt they’d moved far enough from the repository.

“Of course; they almost always do in the end,” Abby answered as a matter of course.

“What do you mean?” Zac asked, confused.

“Well, Tool Spirits are almost immortal; they can live as long as the weapon stays whole. It doesn’t matter for unevolved spirits without a sense of self, but when they evolve into sentient beings, the clock starts ticking,” Abby explained.

“Imagine living an endless amount of time stuck inside a weapon? Your creator is long gone; perhaps you’re forgotten under hundreds of meters of soil or in some hidden chamber, slowly counting the eons? Anyone would go crazy.

“They can hibernate, but the endless passage of time affects everyone. Spirits generally don’t go crazy while in someone’s employ, though.”

Zac shook his head with mixed feelings. He honestly couldn’t tell if Brazla had gone insane, or he just had an extremely annoying personality. For now, he would treat him as a lunatic just in case.

Soon Zac found himself in Adran’s tent, the meeting room filled with the usual members. Most of the spots were filled with the demons who had drafted the plan for Port Atwood. A new addition was Joanna, but she and Mr. Trang were still the only humans. There were some promising people who’d joined from New Washington, but it was too soon to have them present at this kind of meeting.

Zac recapped the situation with the repository since not everyone had been present at the new building earlier. This time, he also mentioned the Heritages, though he still didn’t mention the higher-tiered skills.

The mention of the Celestial Artisan’s Heritage caused quite a commotion, far more than the other one.

“Why are you so excited?” Zac asked the head of agriculture, who was almost jumping in his seat.

“Clan Azh’Rezak spent very little resources on noncombat ventures. The clan mainly gained its resources through hunting beasts and working as mercenaries. A real Heritage will be a huge boon to even us old people with craftsman classes,” he hastily said.

“I am sorry to put some brakes on the excitement, but before we can even discuss perusing Heritages and skills, we need to properly work out how things will work going forward. We have been scraping along for now, but it is time to get structured,” Zac said, quickly cooling down the excited atmosphere.

“Most of us stayed behind on this baby world because things weren’t too good back home at the clan.” Ogras suddenly spoke up, drawing attention. “But I don’t think everyone here has planned what to do for the long term. What will we do? Where will we go? I can tell you right now that I have decided to stay here as part of Port Atwood.

“You know that Lord Zac is the strongest man on this planet; he is the first Lord to emerge, and is a clear candidate to become a Planetary Lord. We’re sitting right on top of a Nexus Vein, and as this baby world matures, the density of energy on this island will far eclipse anything we ever knew back home.

“Rather than venturing out into the Multiverse like a homeless vagabond, I will stay here and build my foundation. With the repository and other benefits we will seize in the future, I believe we will be more powerful than Clan Azh’Rezak in less than a hundred years,” the demon continued.

A few of the demons thoughtfully nodded, whereas others took it as a matter of course that they would stay here.

“I am setting up a proper structure now that I am a sanctioned Lord, and its organization will be largely based on the heterogeneous forces amongst the demonkind. I will use a contribution system. From what I understand, you had something similar in your clan,” Zac followed up after nodding at Ogras.

“Port Atwood has accumulated great amounts of resources through the monster waves and our struggles, and we can’t just give it away. Only those who contribute to pushing Port Atwood forward will get a share. Since Adran can’t do all that work by himself, I am buying a management office that will be in charge of the contribution system,” Zac explained.

“I have my own pursuits, much like the other warriors, and will not have a hands-on approach in managing Port Atwood. Abby here is my assistant who will be in charge of making sure the town runs smoothly,” Zac continued.

From there, the meeting turned to fine details of how the town would be managed. Initially, five ministries would be created, with Zac as the sole leader. There would be no democracy and no councils. Ogras himself wouldn’t have any official role except as an advisor to Zac himself.

The Ministry of War would not only be responsible for the defense of Port Atwood, but also the war effort against the incursions in the future. Ilvere was placed as the leader of that ministry, with Joanna as a second in command. Their first task would be to create a team that would head to Billyville in two weeks.

Zac himself couldn’t go, but there was no reason he couldn’t send some warriors to gain some money and experience. An incursion was always a good source of money for those who survived, and the Ratmen were weak but numerous from the sound of it, somewhat like the zombie horde.

The Ministry of Revenue would be spearheaded by Zakarith, who was tasked to find some humans to help her. Their job would be to keep track of income and spending, and they would also handle Zac’s personal business ventures such as his income from the consortium and the mine.

It was also decided that Port Atwood would, for the time being at least, own all the land of the town and, as soon as the town was up and running, start charging rent. Since he essentially owned the mountain, he would also own the



residences he planned to build over there, designed to be residences for the elite.

The Ministry of Justice was in charge of keeping the law. For now, there hadn't really been any problems that couldn't be handled internally, but as Port Atwood grew, many issues would crop up. Ogras recommended Alea, and Zac thought it sounded like a good idea.

Perhaps people would stay on the straight and narrow, knowing the poison mistress would be in charge of punishments. Alea herself wasn't present at the meeting, so she was promoted in her absence. The poison mistress had avoided Zac since their misunderstanding during the third wave, even though he'd tried to find her to apologize.

The Ministry of Works would manage any government projects, the foremost being the construction of the town. A future project would be to do a proper inspection of the nearby islands in order to set up supporting facilities on them, such as farms, husbandries, and mines.

Finally, a Ministry of State Affairs would be in charge of coordinating the various ministries and departments and communicate progression with Zac.

There currently weren't clear candidates for all positions that needed to be filled, but Zac believed things like that would work themselves out sooner or later. Real talents wouldn't stay hidden forever.

It was also decided that those who worked for Port Atwood would not be given a salary in the form of crystals, but rather, contribution points. Zac also decided that there wouldn't be a way to convert the points to Nexus Coins or Crystals for the time being, though that might change in the future.

Finally, when it came to the repository, it was decided that the first eighty-one people, apart from Ogras and Zac, would get to use the repository once. After that, it would cost contribution points to use, and since the crystal charges were limited, some sort of tests would also be performed so that no precious slots would be used on wastrels.

Zac felt quite happy with the progress from the meeting, but just as he was about to call it a day, Abby dropped a bomb on him.

“As Lord Zac has founded a Global City, and from the fact that we have been placed on an island, the sphere of influence that was given is quite large. There are currently two hundred ninety-eight islands inside your kingdom, many of which are populated.

“I suggest we start building a network of F-grade teleportation arrays between your islands to integrate all your citizens.”

Zac was shocked by the size of his influence. They had scouted less than twenty islands so far, and already they'd found thousands of people. Just how many would be gathered over three hundred of them? Besides, with such a huge area, there was no way that there wasn't any drop-off point for cultivators. Perhaps he would be able to get some more promising people who could benefit from his new Blade Emperor Heritage.

The meeting took hours, but eventually, everything was dealt with. This time, Zac left alone, sending Abby away. After pressing Ilvere for a bit, he was told of a gazebo some distance from the temporary town.

As he neared the small pavilion, he stopped for a second as he saw the familiar form of Alea.



## WAITING

Zac felt paralyzed for a second, unsure of what to do now that he found her. But after a shake of his head, he walked up and sat down next to her.

“Are you here to thank me again?” Alea said with some annoyance when he sat down in the gazebo.

“I’m sorry I doubted you back there. I wasn’t thinking straight in the heat of the moment,” Zac said as he looked over at her. “You have been a great support from the start, and I won’t forget that again.”

She looked mesmerizing in the sunset. Her long silver hair danced in the wind, and her two horns looked like aetheric fire. She looked back at him and only gave a roll of her eyes in response.

“I know. You keep getting hurt because of me. Is there anything I can do to return the favor?” Zac asked, his eyes staying on her this time.

Suddenly, she moved straight at him, and this time, Zac repressed his instincts to block her. If she wanted to punch him to vent some anger, so be it. But his eyes widened as her mouth closed in on his, and her hands wrapped around his head. His arms wrapped around her slender frame as if by instinct, and the two shared a passionate kiss in the sunset.

Long-repressed emotions were surfacing in his mind, making Zac a bit dizzy. The dizziness intensified, and a loud gurgling in his stomach quickly told him that what he felt

might not have an emotional root. A sense of unease quickly doused any passion as Alea slipped out of his hands.

“That’s for pointing your big thing at me,” she said with a giggle and winked at him before she left Zac to his own devices. “A night on the toilet might help you remember to think straight in the future.”

That night, Zac truly understood what it meant to anger a poison master. He’d never felt so empty as he did after his tenth trip to the outhouse, as he’d been exploding out of every orifice with each visit. There were even times where he wondered if he would have even survived if it wasn’t for his high Vitality. However, he almost felt it was worth it as he thought back to the passionate moment in the gazebo.

The next day, a pale-faced Zac walked over to the academy, making some small talk with the girls there. The mood was quite heavy, as a noticeable part of their small army had died during the zombie horde.

“We heard from Joanna that a group of warriors will go to another incursion in a few weeks,” one of the Valkyries suddenly said. “We want to go.”

“You want to go? War is no joke. The Ratmen won’t be as strong as the demons, but they’ll likely be stronger than the zombies. And they’ll also be more cunning,” Zac said skeptically. “It’s good to strive for power, but don’t bite off more than you can chew. There is no rush.”

“We know that. But we finally understand just how far we are from people like you, or even the demon soldiers. We could only stand on the sidelines for most of the battle, completely useless. We came here because we want to get stronger. Some more of us might die if we go, but death is inevitable. Those who survive will be more powerful on our return,” the girl continued.

“Besides, pretty much all of us gained enough experience to get our class. When we go to the next incursion, we will have finished our skill quests, and we will be far stronger than now,” another girl added.

“Oh? What class are you getting?” Zac asked curiously.

“Most of us are getting the Warrior class, with a few getting an Uncommon variant. Alyn says it’s best for us to all have the same starting point, as that will help with War Arrays in the future. From there, we will start to specialize.”

“That’s good,” Zac said with a nod.

Honestly, he was happy that he’d listened to Alyn to have most of them get a Common class. With the new Heritage, their future might look far better compared to if they got some odd class that became available due to their specific circumstances.

“Work hard; you have improved, but there is a long way to go. You can go to the incursion if Ilvere and Alyn judge you’re ready when the time for the operation starts. They have a better grasp on both the power of your squad and of the Ratmen,” Zac said as he walked into a walled-off area of the gravity array and sat down.

It was a small, secluded spot that he kept for himself when he came here to utilize the array. The first thing Zac did was use the rest of the rewards he’d bought with his contribution points. The Fruit of Endurance unfortunately only gave a three-point boost, but it was better than nothing.

The quest for the upgrade to **[Eye of Discernment]** was quite simple. He only needed to inspect a thousand people with the skill, and it would get upgraded. Of course, it was only simple since Zac could essentially inspect anyone without fear of repercussions. If it was some weaker person, the quest might be impossible to finish, as the wrong inspection might result in a beatdown or even death.

Next he sat down and started meditating again. He had already made a huge stride with his improved Dao of Trees, but he wasn’t content with just that. He was already in the last stretch of his F-grade class, but he was far from reaching his target for progression in the Dao. In fact, even with his recent breakthroughs, he was still only third place on the Dao Ladder, with Abbot Everlasting Peace and Guru Anaad Phakiwar firmly ensconced in front of him.

The days passed, and Zac was getting less and less communicative, mainly holing up to practice his skills or meditating. However, progress was limited. Impatience was gnawing at him as he waited for the deadline to arrive. He hadn't expected the final horde to end so quickly and now was stuck waiting for a week until Bernard would open the portal.

The only real change to him was when he got word that the gnome finally got his hands on a pill of purification. It was a pill that was designed to combat Miasma. As soon as Zac got his hands on it, he eagerly ate it, and it truly helped a lot.

Unfortunately, the effect of one such pill was limited. Whatever the Corpselord injected him with wasn't messing around, and it stubbornly kept causing him trouble. Calrin promised to keep looking, but he didn't look hopeful. Zac could only put his hopes on there being more solutions close to where he was going.

Every evening, he would sit down at the array at the appointed time in hopes that the town leader would open his array in advance. Each time, both Ogras and Alea silently stood with him and wordlessly left when he stood up with a shake of his head.

Meanwhile, Port Atwood was springing up with tremendous speed, the earth and wood mages working overtime in creating one structure after another. The humans weren't just lounging around either, and their speed in erecting buildings would give Amish barn raisers a run for their money.

Even the academy was quickly changing, and another contingent was getting created. Quite a few young men had signed up to become soldiers. According to Alyn, she believed that after she rooted out those without aptitude or without the drive necessary, perhaps less than 10% would remain, but at least it was a start.

Even the empty slots in the Valkyrie squad had been refilled with former refugees from the islands. Zac was even more surprised to find out that the new recruits insisted on giving the same pledge as the old members. Zac shook his

head in confusion, but eventually, he relented and accepted, bringing their numbers back up to eighty.

Finally, the agreed-upon day arrived, and Zac sat down on the teleporter array, even though there were hours before the array would open. Outwardly, he was unperturbed, but his heart was hammering, waiting to see whether his gambit worked. The minutes passed, and finally, they reached the agreed-upon time. Still, nothing appeared in his teleportation menu. Only the Cradle of God was public. One minute passed, then another.

Zac was starting to wonder whether the man had succumbed to the poison Zac force-fed him. Perhaps he even found a cure somehow. However, a new town flashed into being, and Zac immediately stood up and looked over at Alea and Ogras, who accompanied him.

“I will be back within the month,” Zac said, and with unwavering determination on his face, he disappeared through the teleporter.

He soon found himself in a small room, and from the first look around, it seemed it was a garage.

“The antidote. Hurry, give me the antidote!” a wheezing voice came from a corner.

Zac looked over and saw John Bernard standing there huddled over. When Zac saw the man, his eyebrows rose in appallment, and shame filled his heart. The man had been quite portly just a week ago, but now he looked like a pale shadow of a man. He had lost almost all his body fat and had thick black lines under his eyes. If Zac didn't know any better, he would have guessed the man in front of him had undergone months of chemotherapy treatment.

Without hesitating, he threw over the small white bottle, and John swallowed the contents without giving it a second glance. Zac also transferred over 2,500,000 Nexus Coins to the man. He had planned to give him a million coins, but after seeing his wretched appearance, he changed his mind.



“I am sorry about putting you through this suffering – desperate times,” Zac said with a shake of his head and then took out one of the small roots that had weeded out the infiltrating monks.

“I will give you a piece of information that might save your life. One of the invading incursions is the Church of Everlasting Dao. They possess infiltrators who essentially have shape-shifting capabilities; they can turn into any person. No scouting techniques can spot the disguise.

“This root is harmless to humans but deadly to the infiltrators. It’s what we used to root out all the spies in our own city. We expect your New World Government is already infiltrated,” Zac said as he threw the root over to John.

The man was absorbed in feeling the effects of the antidote, but Zac’s words woke him up, and he caught the root hesitantly.

“You know, you’re a wanted man now. That demon’s actions in New Washington has made you the enemies of the whole government,” John said just as Zac was about to leave.

“Oh? Are there people outside planning to catch me?” Zac asked.

“Do you think I’m suicidal? I want nothing to do with your conflict. The sooner you’re out of my life, the better,” John said grumpily.

Zac only shook his head and stepped out. It was nighttime here as well, so Zac had no problem slipping into the darkness unencumbered.

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“It’s me,” John said into the radio as he looked himself over in the mirror.

He was already starting to look better, the dark circles under his eyes gone. It also felt like he finally would be able to eat again without it feeling like his teeth were shattering and his throat catching fire.

He was already so engrossed in planning out the feast that he would prepare for himself to celebrate, that he almost forgot he was on a call with a superior.

“Did he come?” a rough voice answered after a few seconds.

“Yes, sir, he stepped through as soon as I opened it. He immediately left town afterward, it seems,” John answered as he went over the list in his head.

He’d definitely open up the bottle of twenty-one-year-old scotch he’d been saving for months now. And a mountain of ribs. They killed that huge boar the other day, and it barely contained a trace of Miasma.

“Good, you’ve done well. We’ll take it from here,” the man on the other end said.

“What are you going to do? He’s Super Brother-Man, after all. He’s not some nobody,” John asked skeptically as he put down the mirror. “He also said something about shape-shifters infiltrating the government, and—”

“You don’t need to worry about that. You are hereby relieved.”

A window shattered, and John only felt a blazing pain in his head before all turned to darkness.



## A THOUSAND FACES

Zac rushed toward southeast along a derelict road. The town Bernard managed, Aubrey Hills, was north of the Dead Zone, and he needed to get to the eastern part. Zac knew there were border towns closer to the incursion from his conversation with Bernard during the auction.

They were right at the edge of what was considered the undead influence. Those kinds of towns weren't under government control but were rather chaotic places under the control of the one with the largest fists.

Its population generally consisted of anyone who wanted to use the incursion as a spot for gaining levels and wealth. Zombies were quite stupid and not overly strong, which made for perfect target practice. Besides, due to the huge populations of China and India, there was almost an endless source of zombies to hunt.

However, Zac knew that the good times of these border towns were limited. The concentration of Miasma at the edge of the incursion should be limited, so it was normal that the zombies weren't too strong there.

But as the zombie hunters depopulated any close-by towns from zombies, they would need to venture further and further into the incursion, where the Miasma was denser. The risk of meeting evolved zombies and other strong beasts was going to get higher and higher.

Zombies weren't the only thing to worry about in the huge zone the Undead Empire controlled. The wildlife that had

lived inside for almost half a year would have evolved like over the rest of the world. With the additional effect of the Miasma, the beasts should be completely insane due to the corruption.

But for now, the towns were havens for those who lived in the area and didn't mind the risk. It was like a macabre gold rush where every walking corpse was a small gold nugget. Zac didn't bother to learn the towns' names since they were peppered along the incursion, and most of them were functionally the same.

There were also rumors of there being settlements even further inside the incursion, though Zac didn't have the coordinates for any place like that. But Zac had no desire to go there in any case, as his goal was clear.

He'd find a border town and get himself oriented. The fact that the government seemed to have made him a target wasn't a surprise, but he needed to find out the extent the enmity reached.

Besides, his information about the undead was from the information crystals back at Port Atwood rather than more detailed information from the locals. They might have figured out various things that could be beneficial to know.

As he moved forward, his wound unceasingly kept pounding, but by now, it barely registered in Zac's mind. His increased Vitality and evolved seed were a great improvement compared to before, as he didn't need to keep his Dao active at all times to keep the spread of corruption at bay.

However, the wound was barely healing, even when he kept using his Dao, and at this speed, it would likely take years before he was completely cured. That was another reason he wanted to stop in the frontier town. Perhaps some people there had attained classes that gave skills targeted at combating Miasma.

Zac kept going until the suns were starting to show, and quickly stopped at what once seemed to have been a rest stop along the highway. The area was completely overgrown by now, and Zac didn't expect to find anything useful. He walked

up to a parked trailer and took out a large mirror, placing it against the vehicle.

Next, he placed a thick cloak rimmed with wolf pelt over his shoulders, and his arms got thick leather vambraces. He even put on a pair of sturdy shoes. He actually also had a pair of shoes that only had a few straps instead of soles, allowing him to freely use his **[Loamwalker]** skill while wearing shoes, but he didn't dare to use those after remembering the state of Fort Roger.

Zac gave a quick spin, happy with the transformation he'd undergone. He felt he almost looked like a barbarian, with wolf pelts covering much of his back. He also put a large high-quality two-handed battleaxe on his back. It was a nasty piece of equipment, and something he'd found up on the monkey mountain amongst the corpses.

He needed a weapon to use that wasn't the same as the one-handed axe he'd shown off on a few occasions. But even if he was going undercover, he didn't want to use a sword or something else, afraid it would hamper his future skill choices.

Next, he focused his Cosmic Energy in his scalp and was amazed to see his hair grow out with speed visible to his eyes. Soon it was long enough that he put it in a bun with a leather string.

Not only that, but he also grew out a beard, covering the somewhat distinct scar on his mouth that still wasn't gone.

He looked like an almost completely different person, and that was the point. Still, he wasn't done, and he activated a fractal that was placed on his throat. His body suddenly was racked in pain, but he gritted his teeth and pushed through. In just a few seconds, he'd completely changed. He was now a few inches shorter, while his face had undergone a large transformation.

It was the skill **[Thousand Faces]**, one of the eighty-one skills in the repository. It was a shape-shifting skill, and something he'd decided to pick up after having seen how effective the priest infiltrators were. He was a high-profile

person, and his appearance might cause unwanted trouble, and this was his solution.

It was only one of the mid-grade skills, and it didn't really fit his pathways very well. That was why it hurt like his bones were ground to dust and then reshaped when he used it. But it still felt like one of the most useful skills in the repository for his current needs.

Looking back from the mirror now was a middle-aged man with a more angular facial structure and a hooked nose. Not even Kenzie should recognize him as he currently looked. As the skill actually changed the bone structure of someone, it didn't take any energy to maintain, but a weakness was that it couldn't change his aura.

An aura was almost like a fingerprint these days, and some scouts could use the fluctuations a person gave out to identify people in disguises. However, for that to work, the scout would have to have met him earlier, so the risk for that was not too big unless the people of New Washington were actively hunting him.

Satisfied with the transformation, he packed away his mirror and got ready to leave. He still wore his E-graded robes underneath the furs, not wanting to give up the defensive charges they contained.

Back on his island, this many layers would have been decidedly hot, but here on the mainland, it was starting to get quite chilly. It was already November, though Zac didn't know if the months or seasons had changed somehow.

He kept going through the desolate wasteland, but this time, he had taken out one of his cars. It wasn't one of the modified ones that were running on Nexus Crystals, but rather one of the normal ones. However, there were a few inscriptions placed in a few unseen spots that would make it sturdier.

He'd missed driving, and enjoyed the feeling, even though the scenery was a bit dour. But soon he actually saw some activity. Much like in the area around New Washington, there was almost never traffic, but he actually saw a jeep speed

across a field in the distance. It looked quite rickety, the car jumping, and seemed about to keel over at any moment.

Zac understood why whoever was inside was driving that recklessly, though. Right behind the car, a huge tiger was in hot pursuit. It was even larger than the car, but that wasn't the odd thing about it. Even from the distance, Zac could see that it was grayish, not having the usual yellow and black stripes. Its eyes were also shining in a similar turquoise as the undead beacons did.

It clearly was in the process of mutating from living inside Miasma for a long time, though Zac didn't understand what it was doing here. There was no discernable Miasma in the atmosphere where they were, so it must have wandered out from the Dead Zone. Perhaps it had an appetite for humans and was out on a hunt.

A bump in the terrain suddenly sent the vehicle out of control, but as it was about to overturn, three people nimbly jumped out of the car and landed on the ground as the jeep kept going. From how practiced their movements were, Zac almost thought that wasn't the first time they had been forced to jump out of a runaway vehicle.

Zac finally got a good look at the party and saw it was one Caucasian male and two Asians, one woman and one man. All of them looked to be around their thirties, and judging from their gear, they weren't people who had stayed put within the safety of a wall since the integration.

The zombified tiger gave off a ghastly roar that Zac could clearly hear even from the distance, and pounced at the trio. The commotion actually made Zac stop his car and get out. For a second, he wondered if he should rush over there to save them, but the three put up a valiant defense against the beast.

While they weren't some supreme powerhouses, they were stronger than the Valkyries back in Port Atwood, and they had complementary skills. Still, the tiger seemed extremely durable, and it was unclear whether they would be able to whittle it down before they ran out of Cosmic Energy.



“You there! Please assist us, and half the value of the Beast Core is yours!” the Asian man in the back shouted over at Zac in passable English.

Zac’s brows rose when he heard the offer, and he ran over to the battle. Beast Cores were crystals that contained a good chunk of the total Cosmic Energy of a beast. Zac didn’t expect to hear it mentioned here, as generally that wasn’t something that should exist in an animal until they reached D-grade.

At that point, both humans and beasts would develop a core in their body that could compress and contain vast amounts of Cosmic Energy. This was a sharp difference from how it was now, where Cosmic Energy was generally stored in every cell of the body. A core was far more efficient, and successfully forming one was akin to getting a high-powered battery in your body.

Zac used **[Inquisitive Eyes]** on the beast.

### **[Miasmatic Bengal Tiger – Undead. Level 43 – Endurance]**

Zac getting the skill had caused his reputation to take somewhat of a hit, and rumors of him being a peeping Tom started to spread. But he had finished his quest in just a few days by using **[Eye of Discernment]** on almost everyone in the town, much to the citizens’ annoyance.

The new and improved version was still F-grade, but much more useful. It now also displayed what was the highest attribute of the one he spied on, which would give a hint of their battle style. It also could discern the grades of many resources, which was a good way to learn if something he found was useful or not.

With a fluid motion, Zac took the large two-handed axe from his back and joined the fray. Naturally, he would have been able to kill the beast in a simple swing, but he only used a bit of his power in order to not stand out.

The intense battle kept going for a few minutes, and Zac was a large contributor to the victory, as every swing of his contained quite a punch that maimed the animal. He purposely

made himself seem slightly stronger than the trio so that they wouldn't get any ideas after the fight finished.

Finally, they felled the beast, and with a groan, it thumped down on the ground.

“Thank you, friend. That's some swing you have there. I don't recognize you. Are you new to the area?” the blond man said between pants.

“I came here to get stronger. I'm heading to a frontier town now,” Zac said with a hoarse voice. “What's that Beast Core you mentioned?”

“Oh, so you're not from around here.” The man nodded. “The animals that live deep in the Dead Zone have started to get these crystals in their heads. We call them Beast Cores. They are filled with tons of Miasma and are useful for various things. You can even use them for cultivation, but I wouldn't recommend that. Fries your brain after a while.”

The other two, who seemed to be siblings at closer scrutiny, nodded at that.

“General Stores buy them for a pretty penny, so they are like gold here. Some zombies have them as well, especially the stronger ones. The stores pay by the gram, and finding these have become more profitable than just grinding low-level zombies,” the Asian man who spotted him earlier added.

It seemed they weren't real Beast Cores after all, but rather something created by the Miasma. Still, Zac curiously looked on as the Asian girl took out a large knife and started cutting into the head of the tiger.

“I'm John, by the way. I was an expat in Hong Kong before all this,” John said with an expansive gesture. “This is Liqui and Hung.”

“I'm David,” Zac said, using the first name that came to his mind. “How did this thing get all the way out here? From what I gathered before coming, these types of beasts stay further in the Dead Zone?”

“Ah, well, that's sort of our mistake. We accidentally enraged it, and it followed us for more than a day. We got off

track while trying to shake it off,” John said.

“Got it,” Liqui said with a melodious voice as she took a grayish crystal from the head of the tiger. She quickly wiped it off with a rag and displayed it in front of them.

“Wow, it’s a big one. Should be worth over thirty thousand,” John said with a whistle.

“So, uh... Do you think we can catch a ride? Our poor Betty seems to have given her last breath,” John said as he looked at the overturned jeep, which had smoke coming out of it.

“It’s fine. You just need to eat this root first,” Zac said as he took out the minty root from a backpack.



## THE FRONTIER

“Excuse me?” John said, looking down at the small root in Zac’s hand.

“It seems the rumors haven’t reached the border towns yet. One of the incursions contains shape-shifters. They have probably infiltrated both the government and many strong factions. However, this root is deadly to them while it is harmless to us humans,” Zac said and ate a large chunk of it to prove he was speaking the truth.

“It’s called Springroot and is available for purchase in the General Store. Nowadays, people take a bite of it to prove they’re not a shape-shifter where I come from,” Zac continued.

The three looked confused at each other until Liqui took the piece of root and examined it. Her eyes shone with some mysterious luster for a second, telling Zac she was using some sort of ocular skill. Perhaps her main role in the group was scouting.

“No poison,” she said, and the other two nodded with some relief.

With a shrug of his shoulders, John broke off a piece and ate it.

“Not bad, minty. It might double as a mouthwash,” John said. “These shape-shifters, what do they look like?”

“I heard they’re lizard people,” Zac said with a shake of his head, knowing how it sounded. “Apparently, they are part of some Multiverse cult.”

“Lizard-people cultists, just what we need.” John spat on the ground, while the other two seemed to agree with the sentiment as they ate the root.

Zac wasn't really worried about the three being infiltrators. While there likely was over a thousand of them out there, they had quite a bit of ground to cover. They might have some unknown means for reaching various settlements, but they shouldn't be able to use the teleporters, meaning it should take some time to spread over the planet.

Besides, Zac hadn't even heard anything about the Church's incursion, meaning they might be extremely far away. Ogras believed that it was out there, only that the government was keeping it secret.

It would be easy to motivate within the government ranks. Just call it a secret government resource to train their elite, and even the actual government officials would keep it secret. Meanwhile, the infiltrators could slowly ensconce themselves within the government.

The reason Zac made the three eat the root was rather to get an excuse to tell the story. He hoped that doing this would create rumors to spread like ripples on the water. Zac alone doing it wouldn't cut it, but he was determined to have his whole force spread the knowledge as soon as he was back with Kenzie.

Soon the four were sitting in Zac's modified car, pushing through the wilderness. It might be a bit weird for some loner to allow three strangers into his car in these uncertain times, but Zac didn't really care about that. It would give him an opportunity to gather intelligence as he drove, which would save some time.

“Who's in charge of the frontier town?” Zac asked as he drove, occasionally avoiding the huge potholes that had formed over the past months.

“Eastern Hills is run by a man calling himself Ling Tian. It sort of means ‘Rise above the Heavens.’ Kind of stupid, but quite a few around these parts have taken these Dao monikers,

thinking they are the main characters of some story,” John said with a snort.

“It’s kind of weird that the System uses Dao while it was a concept in Asia even before the integration,” Zac noted.

It was something he still didn’t quite understand. Was it a coincidence, or was there something to it? That wasn’t the only thing, as there was also the issue of the demons. It made Zac wonder just what had happened on Earth thousands of years ago. Perhaps the old stories of mages and dragons were more than just stories?

“Yeah, I’ve wondered about that myself,” John said. “The general belief is that the old masters of Daoism managed to peek through the veil, so to speak, and learn some aspects of the Dao. Who knows, perhaps there was Cosmic Energy on Earth back in the day, but it ran out?”

“The old masters have lit the way for our people. I believe that’s why the System gave us the hardest challenge,” Hung said from the back seat.

“So, Ling Tian?” Zac prodded, not commenting on the harshness of challenges. While the undead horde was a pain, he didn’t feel it beat having to close a whole incursion on your own.

“He’s a bit annoying, but one of the better leaders. That’s why we stay there. He doesn’t do anything untoward, and he is usually out fighting zombies,” John said.

“Annoying how?” Zac asked with some interest.

“Well, he imagines himself to be the savior of mankind or something. He keeps trying to gather together the townspeople to launch crusades at the core of the incursion. But you know, few people are that crazy. Charging the core of the Dead Zone is a suicide mission,” John said with a shake of his head.

“*Chuunibyou*,” Liqui muttered from the back.

Zac didn’t comment, but he felt a bit hopeless inside. He didn’t know whether this leader of the frontier town was delusional or not, but the whole situation in these border towns was problematic. There seemed to be quite a few strong

warriors here, but people mainly fought to empower and enrich themselves.

Perhaps this situation would have been okay if the undead were weak. If that was the case, then sooner or later, the zombies would be hunted into extinction. However, Zac knew reality wasn't so convenient. As soon as the leaders like the Corpselord started their crusades, these border towns would be deserted in the blink of an eye.

There was no organization and no order. There would be no real resistance against the invaders when they started their conquest in earnest. People like these three would just move somewhere else, if they even survived.

Zac had been thinking of what to do about these incursions since he finally became a Lord. He felt that his quest had given him the greatest clue what to do from here. He needed to kill the leaders of the incursions, and the rest would sort itself out. A force without powerhouses to protect and lead the ranks was just prey in the end.

The only problem was that he hadn't even managed to kill the Corpselord, and Ogras believed that those who arrived at his island weren't the highest-ranking members of their respective incursions. Perhaps the rockman was the exception, though they weren't sure. Still, it was a plan, and he still had some time before the limiters on the invaders were completely removed.

After another two hours of driving, they finally reached their target, Eastern Hills. Zac was surprised by its size as he slowly drove through a huge gate. When he imagined the frontier towns, he had thought that they would look like Fort Roger, but with stronger people.

However, reality differed quite a bit. The wall was a thick and sturdy combination of cement and stones, with armed soldiers walking along the wall walk. The town inside was somewhat clean and orderly, though Zac saw the people looked quite rough.

To his surprise, he saw that at least 80% of those on the streets were of Asian heritage, with the rest being a random



mix. He hadn't really thought along those lines before, but he realized that even if China had taken a huge hit from the incursion, there should still be a great number of survivors in the area.

And it was clear that these people weren't like the survivors in Fort Roger. Almost everyone was armed with some sort of weapon, mostly clubs or spears. Most looked to be in good condition, but there were also a few who looked pale and emitted a cold aura, making Zac frown.

"Miasma poisoning. You get like this if you absorb too many Beast Cores or stay in the Dead Zone too long," John explained after noticing Zac's frown.

A bestial roar suddenly erupted from near the main road they were driving along, and Zac stopped the car.

"A transformation; this is a good lesson for you, David," John said as he jumped out of the car.

Zac curiously followed after taking out the keys. Just a hundred meters away, a crowd was gathering some distance from a man who spasmed and growled erratically.

"This is the end for those who get too greedy," John explained as he looked at the odd man without pity. "He's absorbed too much Miasma, and he's lost control of it. He's turning."

"Turning? Is there nothing to do in a case like this?" Zac asked with some pity.

He sympathized a bit with the man, but honestly, Zac was mainly thinking about himself. He had a wound filled with highly concentrated Miasma, and this would have been his end if he didn't possess the Dao of Trees.

"Perhaps with the help of a strong purifier, but I doubt they would risk getting close to someone who's lost all reason," John said with a shake of his head.

"Purifier? What's that?" Zac asked curiously.

"It's what we call people who have skills and classes that can purify the Miasma. Remember, don't piss off a purifier

while you're staying on the frontier. Getting their help can be the difference between life and death if you get wounded in the Dead Zone. Besides, many are desperate to curry their favor.

"So if you piss off a purifier, don't be surprised if you get mobbed by a bunch of zombie hunters who just want to form a relationship with them," John said with a low voice.

Zac's heartbeat started to increase when hearing John's explanation. It sounded like a purifier was exactly what he needed to take care of his wound.

"Who is the best purifier in this town?" Zac asked, trying not to sound too eager.

"You're talking like they're a dime a dozen. They're extremely rare and generally only reside in the larger towns on the edge of the Dead Zone," John said with a shake of his head. "There is a purifier a few towns over. It would take almost a day to drive there."

Zac frowned at that, unsure what to do. Either he'd follow his original plan and push through the incursion to get to the eastern side, or he'd detour and try his luck with a purifier.

"Why are you asking?" John asked with some confusion. "Are you hurt somewhere? You don't look to be suffering from Miasma poisoning."

"Just orienting myself. Who knows what'll happen in the future; seems like a good idea to know where the healers are," Zac said with a nonchalant shrug.

"Ain't that the truth. However, you shouldn't think of the purifiers as a backup plan. Their energy is limited, and they rarely see people off the streets. Look around; quite a few here have more Miasma in their bodies than they'd like. If they could get that fixed, most would. Oh, it seems time's up."

The sounds of bones cracking and grinding against each other made Zac refocus on the unfortunate man zombifying.

"This one belongs to the Frost Wolves," a man with a badge resembling a howling wolf suddenly said as he stepped forward accompanied by three underlings.

“Fuck you, it belongs to whoever is the fastest,” another man with two short swords retorted.

“What’s going on?” Zac asked with a subdued voice.

“These things are quite valuable after they turn; they’re like evolved zombies. The kill gives a large amount of Cosmic Energy, and it is pretty much guaranteed to have a large core. Poor bastard’s essentially become a walking treasure trove.”

“So why are they waiting?” Zac asked.

“The core is currently forming. When the transformation is complete, then the core is formed,” John explained as he hesitantly looked over the spectators.

“We should back away. Too many strong people are present,” he said as he distanced himself from the hubbub.

Zac didn’t really care about some Miasma core, and he backed away as well, and together they saw the spectators rip the poor man into pieces like hungry hyenas.

The man with the two swords triumphantly held up the decapitated head of the zombie after a few seconds, causing the others to swear and walk away, leaving the mangled corpse where it was.

“They’re just giving up?” Zac asked.

“Rules of the town. When the core’s claimed, the battle is over. However, that guy might need to watch his back; the Frost Wolf Mercenaries are a bit shady,” John said with a shrug as he jumped into Zac’s car again.

“You don’t have a place to stay, right? Why don’t you join us for the night? You can learn about how things work here in the wild east.”

“Sounds good,” Zac answered with a last glance at the corpse of the pitiful man before jumping back into the driver’s seat.



## PURIFIER WANG

Zac was currently speeding along the deserted road, heading east. He was still driving the car, as it was pretty much as fast as him jogging. He'd also found that it was easier for him to use the Dao of Trees while driving compared to jogging, so it was also better for his wound.

Ever since he'd arrived at the edge of the Dead Zone, he had sensed that the atmosphere contained some Miasma. It was only a smidgeon, but Zac noticed to his annoyance that his wound seemed to passively absorb it. He was therefore forced to use his Dao of Trees a bit more than he did back on the island.

That was why he'd decided to look up one of the purifiers, even if it would waste at least one day. He felt it only fair to assume his condition would worsen when he went into the Dead Zone, so if he could get the wound fixed ahead of that, he would likely save more time in the end.

The image of the mutilated corpse on the street of Eastern Hills was a poignant image of what would happen if he didn't properly take care of his wound. It would be a cosmic joke if he survived the incursion and the three waves, only to turn into a zombie because he didn't properly tend to his festering gut.

He'd stayed the night at John's place. He lived together with the siblings in a pretty large house. It turned out that they were a small mercenary group, and the reason that John was so friendly from the start was that he hoped to recruit Zac. There were originally seven people, forming a pretty strong squad

that mainly focused on finding herbs and other valuables deeper in the core zone.

However, months of risking their lives had resulted in only three being left of the group, and they finally had to admit they needed to bolster their squad after being unable to finish the tiger on their own.

If Zac actually was who he pretended, then he might have taken them up on their offer. Going into the Dead Zone alone was perilous; having a squad to watch your back was preferable. They had been disappointed at his refusal, but they made no big deal about it.

Zac had only stayed the night and left early in the morning. The former expat helped out quite a bit in explaining how things worked, even though Zac refused John's invitation. More troubling was what he heard about himself, or rather, Super Brother-Man.

Rumors about him had already reached the frontier. There were all kinds of rumors, but the core of them was generally that he consorted with the invaders, which was why he had gotten so strong. John had also heard about Ogras' deeds in New Washington, though the details had gotten extremely twisted.

However, there was no official proclamation from the government, which only made Zac more uneasy. It only meant that whatever they planned would be done under the table rather than in the open.

He also didn't think that rumors were spreading organically, as only a week had passed since the auction. Zac believed that the government was trying to speed things along. Perhaps they were trying to boost their own reputation by dragging Super Brother-Man through the mud.

Zac wanted to get his name cleared, but for now, he chose to ignore the rumor mill. He didn't care what the world thought of him as long as he could reach his sister. Since John had been so helpful, Zac left a few hundred Nexus Crystals in his room when leaving.

He had no idea if he'd meet the three again, as they had their goals and he had his. He was currently driving toward one of the main border towns in the area, which was somewhat ostentatiously named Perseverance. Apparently, it was originally a part of Chengdu, and over fifty thousand people lived there at the moment.

Zac kept driving for most of the day, passing a few towns on the way. He actually encountered a few parties on the road, though people kept to their own, likely afraid of getting attacked. There were no witnesses and no laws out in the wild, and Zac guessed few people would take a risk like John and the other two did.

The suns were already setting when he arrived at his destination, and it appeared he just made it before the large town gates were closing.

“One thousand Nexus Coins to enter with a vehicle,” a guard said as he hailed Zac.

Zac's brows rose at the price, but he still paid up and drove through. The price was a bit surprising, as it was equivalent to killing at least twenty decently strong zombies. If everyone had to pay that amount when returning from an excursion, then the town would have to make quite some profit.

Zac drove some ways into the town before turning into a few back alleys. When he found a secluded spot with no pedestrians, he quickly exited the vehicle and put it in a Cosmos Sack before quickly walking away.

He knew that cars were generally safe if he parked it somewhere, but he didn't want to take any risks, as there were inscriptions on his vehicle making it special.

Most cars on the frontier were actually booby-trapped nowadays with various explosives, as good terrain vehicles were hard to come by and fiercely protected. There were car mechanics who mainly dealt in installing bombs in hard-to-find places with hidden triggers. Stealing one was akin to sitting on a barrel of gunpowder that could go off at any time.

Zac walked around the town, getting a sense of the area. The whole place felt rougher compared to Eastern Hills, and there were more people who seemed to be barely scraping by. There was one thing that confused him a bit. He noted that many of the weaker pedestrians seemed to have accumulated more Miasma in their bodies compared to the stronger ones.

However, after seeing a street vendor selling food, he understood why. Even if the vendor slathered the skewers in some sauce, Zac could see that the meat was gray and sickly-looking, and he could even sense some corrupt energy in the meat. It seemed that food was getting scarce, and they were forced to eat animals tainted with Miasma.

Zac's brows furrowed with disgust as he walked away, happy that he had stocked up with food that would last months in his pouches. He didn't have time to worry about the people slowly turning themselves into zombies, but instead, he was trying to listen in on conversations to find out more about the purifier. It didn't take long to learn where the purifier, who was apparently called Wang Guo, resided.

The purifier ran what was called a Miasma clinic out of the bottom floor of his building. Zac quickly walked over there and found that there already was a long line of pale people, most clearly suffering from Miasma poisoning. Zac shrugged and just went to the back of the line.

"Excuse me, how long does it usually take to get to see the doctor? Is he still working at this hour?" Zac asked the man in front of him.

"Don't you know how this works?" The man turned around with a dour face, though he quickly moderated his demeanor after seeing the huge axe on Zac's back. "We're lining up for getting a chance at getting treated tomorrow. Mr. Wang only has open office once a week, and he treats people as long as his Cosmic Energy allows."

Zac wasn't too enthused about waiting the whole night in line when there was no guarantee he'd even get to meet the purifier. As he was mulling over what to do, he suddenly



spotted a man walking straight up to the closed doors and entering.

“Who was that?” Zac asked the man in front of him.

“One of Lord Perseverance’s lieutenants,” the man answered in a hushed voice. “They always get purified after returning to town.”

Zac understood the implications. The rules clearly weren’t the same for everyone. Since this Mr. Wang seemed to change his tune depending on who visited, then Zac wouldn’t need to wait in this endless line. Zac was worried about the purifier being limited somehow to only helping out once a week, but it seemed it was rather that he didn’t want to waste too much of his time.

“So you think one can get purified without waiting if one pays enough?” Zac asked the man in front of him again.

The man nervously looked around and ignored the question. But a few coughs from Zac and walking up uncomfortably close forced the man to answer in a whisper.

“Hey, I don’t want trouble. Mr. Wang is petty, and if he finds out I’ve talked about him behind his back, who knows what trouble I’d get into. But yeah, he is also greedy, so he’d definitely heal you if you paid enough. Honestly, he is only doing these open houses since the Lord Perseverance is paying him to,” the man wheezed, then pointedly started ignoring Zac.

Finally understanding the way things worked, he unhesitantly walked up to the door to the clinic. A few mutters and curses were thrown in his direction from those in the line, but no one wanted to cause trouble or lose their spot, so Zac entered unaccosted.

“Hey! Didn’t you see the line? Purifier Wang’s open hour starts tomorrow.” An annoyed, but sweet voice entered his ears as soon as he walked through and closed the door.

It was a woman who was sitting by a clear glass table in a small empty lobby. She was quite good-looking in a sultry

way, but her appearance only lowered Zac's opinion of this so-called healer.

The woman was clearly wearing a "Sexy Nurse" Halloween outfit rather than actual scrubs, showing off a great amount of skin. Furthermore, she wasn't alone, as a strong-looking bodyguard lounged in a chair nearby.

From what Zac had heard so far, Wang Guo was far from some benevolent hero, but rather some shady person who had lucked into a great class. He suppressed his mounting annoyance and walked up to the counter.

"I have traveled far to meet Purifier Wang, as I hear he is one of the most skilled people around," Zac said.

Actually, that wasn't true, but Wang Guo was the closest one to the east of Eastern Hills, and Zac didn't want to waste more time than he had to.

"It doesn't matter. Purifier Wang only sees patients once a week, as he needs the rest of the week to recuperate. The great healing arts take a lot of strength," the nurse answered with a huff as the bodyguard started to move toward him.

Zac didn't respond and instead only took out one of his Cosmos Sacks and poured a small hill of Nexus Crystals on her desk and leaned over it toward the startled girl.

"Unfortunately, my time is limited. This is a small gift to you. I would be happy to give a much larger donation to Purifier Wang as well. Could you tell me what I'd need to do to get the same treatment as the guy who just entered?"

The girl expertly took the crystals and swept them into a Chanel bag with extreme swiftness, cleaning off the table in only a second. After that, she looked at the guard, who shrugged.

"Since you wish to donate to help keep his little clinic running, I'm sure Purifier Wang would be able to squeeze you in," she said with a smile as she leaned forward a bit, showcasing her impressive cleavage.

It was at this moment the man from earlier exited the door leading further into the clinic. He was surprised to see the

gruff-looking Zac standing in the lobby, leaning over the counter, and he appeared extremely incensed at seeing the receptionist's suggestive pose and smile.

“Who the fuck are you? Yao Yao, get away from that barbarian,” the man growled and quickly walked over.

“I mean no trouble. I am just here to see Purifier Wang,” Zac said as he quickly backed away.

“Then why the fuck are you hitting on my woman?” the lieutenant growled.

“He's here to give a big donation to the clinic,” the nurse quickly said, trying to defuse the situation.

However, the comment only seemed to enrage the man further.

“So you're trying to flash your little wealth in front of my girl? You might as well leave all of it behind, then,” he said and, with a lightning-quick movement, took out a dagger, unhesitatingly stabbing toward Zac's throat.

Zac was about to kill the man in front of him by instinct, but at the last second restrained himself. Things also became more convoluted after the guard joined the fight after some hesitation, trying to help the angry man out.

Zac tripped one of the men and brought the other one with him down on the ground, causing a chaotic grapple fight. He quickly knocked out the lieutenant on the way down, and after brawling with the bodyguard for a few seconds, Zac awarded him with a measured punch, knocking him out.

One could only hope the struggle would look genuine to the shocked spectator, as he was in no mood to pretend any longer than that. One of the men actually managed to land a punch in his gut, which made his wound hurt like a hot tong, souring his mood considerably.

“I'll go ahead and visit the purifier now. I would prefer not to be disturbed,” Zac said to the gaping nurse before heading into the inner parts of the clinic.



## HEALING

Zac felt annoyed as he stepped through the door to the back of the clinic. He just wanted to go through the town unannounced and disappear before anyone could remember him. Yet he'd been forced to knock out one of the higher-ups of the town just because of some silly jealousy. Who knew what type of trouble would come knocking if he stayed too long.

With a few quick steps, he walked through an unadorned corridor and found himself in an austere clinic that resembled some ancient herbalist's treatment room.

Various herbs were hanging from the roof, creating a thick scent in the room, and the walls were covered with old drawings that seemed to show the chakras of the body. However, the room was completely empty, with the purifier nowhere in sight.

Zac frowned and looked around a bit. Suddenly, he spotted that something was odd with a large medicine cabinet, and with a simple push, moved it to the side. It led him to another room, and Zac was rendered speechless when he entered.

The interior looked like the basement of a real anime fanatic, if this particular fanatic was also a corrupt warlord. Stands displaying figurines were placed next to machine guns and actual gold bars. The room was completely cluttered, and in the back, a man in his late thirties was lounging in a recliner, watching some old series on the television.

A cough from Zac made the man jump up like his ass was on fire. He quickly swiveled toward the exit and seemed

shocked to see a man decked in furs and a war axe standing in his sanctuary.

“Who are you? How dare you enter this place?” the man said with a flustered face as he tried to shoo Zac back. “Out, OUT!”

“I didn’t mean to intrude on your... private area,” Zac said with another cough as he backed out into the clinic. “Your nurse sent me through to get some help in exchange for a donation. After that, I’m leaving this town.”

Finally, after having stepped outside and closed the hidden door, the man seemed to calm down.

“Wait here a second,” he said as he rushed over to the door and shouted for the nurse, who quickly came running.

The two exchanged a few whispers as they surreptitiously glanced over in Zac’s direction, until the nurse left again.

“No way; if I help you, then Perseverance will get angry with me. You beat up one of his lieutenants. Who knows what he’ll do,” the purifier said, looking scared.

“That’s why I would like you to hurry up,” Zac said, simply pouring some crystals on the floor in front of him. “I pay well.”

Greed shone in Mr. Wang’s eyes as he saw the crystals falling like rain from Zac’s bag.

“Fine, tw–no, five thousand crystals, and not one less,” the purifier said, not being able to stop himself from licking his mouth. “And leave right after. I will deny having helped you.”

“Fine, go ahead,” Zac said as he started to undress.

“Don’t you know anything?” the man hurriedly said with a look of disgust. “Who wants to see your naked body? Just point where your Miasma wound is.”

Zac stopped, feeling a bit surprised, but pointed toward his side where the festering wound was located.

The purifier took a step forward, and a golden light started to emit from his hands. Zac carefully gazed at the light and

was relieved to see that the purifier didn't seem to be playing any tricks on him. The light felt like concentrated Cosmic Energy, but it was somehow changed to contain far more of the vibrant life that always existed in it. It was like the opposite of Miasma in a sense.

The man held his hands close to the wound and closed his eyes in concentration. Zac soon felt a warmth reminiscent of what it felt like eating healing pills around the blackish tendrils spreading from the core of his injury. But as soon as the warmth entered him, it disappeared, and the purifier backed away with wide eyes.

“Just how are you alive? What is this wound? There's no way I can treat that,” he stammered, looking shocked at what he'd found.

“Never mind how I'm alive. I know it's a bad wound, but I felt the effect of your skills. Do as much as you can,” Zac said with a sigh. “Besides, healing a wound this severe should give a huge boost in experience to your class, right?”

Zac guessed that his class was considered a noncombat class, and that healing people would be considered progressing the class. If it worked the same as with a blacksmith and the like, healing a nasty wound should give a large boost of experience. The man still looked troubled, but the reminder seemed to have reawakened the greed in the man.

The purifier once again extended his hands, though much more carefully this time, and the golden light emerged once more. It started on the outer edges of the wound, and Zac was ecstatic to find that the corruption was melting away at a speed that far eclipsed what he was able to do by himself with his Dao of Trees.

However, Zac started to frown as the minutes passed, and the purifier was starting to turn pale. A sheen of perspiration was already covering his face, but he still had only managed to work on the outer rim of the wound. The core was still the same, throbbing with Miasma and rot.

Suddenly, the man opened his eyes wide and fell back, spewing a mouthful of black blood on the ground. Zac was

alarmed and made to move toward him, but an intense pain that was as bad as when he'd gotten stabbed by the Corpse-lord's weapon exploded in his side. Huge waves of Miasma started to spread out of it, trying to completely convert Zac.

The wound in his side formed some sort of resonance with a spot behind and slightly beneath his navel, making Zac aghast. His pathways were extremely condensed in that area, and he might lose some of his strength if they were ruined. Even worse, he had already learned that was the spot where most Cultivator's Cores were formed upon reaching the D-grade.

What if his future potential was ruined by what this man just did?

He fought back the rampaging wound with everything that he had, putting his Dao of Trees on overdrive. Pale with anger and pain, Zac stepped forward and grabbed the shell-shocked purifier by the throat.

"What the fuck did you do?" Zac growled. "Fix it, or I'll break your neck."

"I swear it wasn't me," the man squealed with pain. "It was your wound. It's *alive*."

"I don't care. Heal it right now," Zac said.

"Don't you understand? There's no way I can heal it. Perhaps not even the strongest purifiers can. And look at me; you've poisoned me!" he said with tears in his eyes as he held up his hands.

The hands were grayish, almost looking like the hands of a zombie. They also gave off the cold aura of death, indicating they were flooded with Miasma. The sight quickly stopped Zac in his tracks, and he let go of the man, who plopped down on the ground with a groan.

What the man said finally registered in Zac's mind. The wound truly felt alive, as it time and time again tried to break through the Dao Field Zac had created around the wound.



When it didn't work, it tried to break out from another direction, just like a caged animal.

The situation was under control for now, but he still felt the wound having spread to his core, causing god knows what kind of damage. Zac also knew it would be very strenuous to keep his Dao Field going indefinitely.

“What do I do to calm the wound down?” Zac said with a frown, not wanting to just leave it like this.

“I have no idea. I only got this class since my family were exorcists. Or con men, you know. I helped out until I was old enough to get the hell out from there and get a real job. I don't really know anything about Miasma or fighting the undead. I just push the light into the wounds, and they heal,” he panted as he covered his zombified hands in the golden light.

“Man, it will take weeks to rid my hands of this much Miasma. And this is only the backlash. I don't understand how you're alive, but you should go and say your final goodbyes,” he said with a bleak expression, though Zac felt he could discern some *schadenfreude* in the end. “I can't imagine anyone surviving that *thing*.”

Zac looked down on the wounded purifier with a frown, unsure what to do from here on out. He'd thought that visiting a purifier would either heal him or not work. The fact that it seemed to have made things worse wasn't one of the expected outcomes.

He could keep going along the edge of the incursion, finding other purifiers to help out as well, but there was no telling how much time he would waste that way. Weeks, perhaps. And there was no guarantee that the other healers had any solutions.

The other option was to just hope for the best and push through the Dead Zone. That meant that he would have to go through areas with dense Miasma while his wound was out of control, though.

Finally, he settled on staying the night in the town. He would wait to see if the restless attacks would subside. If

things got worse, he might have no choice but to seek out a better purifier, but if the wound got back to normal again, he would push through the Dead Zone.

“Sorry about your hands,” Zac said as he placed the agreed-upon crystals on the ground. “You should start working in earnest on your class. My wound came from an evolved zombie, so this kind of injury will become more and more common. If you can’t heal these kinds of wounds, then sooner or later, some wounded powerhouse might lash out at you in anger. That little bodyguard downstairs won’t be able to protect you.”

Mr. Wang didn’t answer Zac, but the purifier’s frown deepened as he thoughtfully looked at his hands. With that, Zac left the small room and walked through the clinic. Zac didn’t actually know if what he said was the truth, but humanity needed as many competent purifiers as possible.

Wang Guo got such a gift thanks to his family’s odd occupation, but if he continued like now, that precious gift would get squandered, and it might lead to the death of many warriors who might otherwise have survived.

The two men were still lying unconscious on the ground when Zac returned to the lobby, though they had been repositioned so that their airways were unobstructed. The nurse called Yao Yao looked up when he appeared, but his facial expression must have been quite bad, since she flinched away.

“Is there an ambush waiting for me outside?” Zac only asked with a hoarse voice as he gave the girl an even look.

“I don’t know. No one has come in or out since you arrived. Is... Purifier Wang okay?” she answered, looking a bit scared.

“He’s fine, but a bit drained. He will likely not be able to work tomorrow,” Zac said with a shrug as he exited the clinic.

A quick look around showed nothing out of the usual except the fact that the whole queue was looking at him with curious or envious eyes. There were no guards lined up, and

Zac felt no danger through his sense, so he simply walked away.

A few quick twists and turns later, he found himself in a secluded area, where he changed his large fur cloak for a more nondescript one. He thought about changing his full face, but he was afraid of doing that at the moment.

The pain of the transformation might cause him to lose focus, which he couldn't risk while his wound rampaged around in his gut. He did, however, remove the bun, causing his long hair to cover his face somewhat.

Next, he hurried over to a tavern far from the clinic. He had already seen a few as he walked through the town earlier, as apparently, many zombie hunters didn't bother owning property. They left for long stretches of time, and their homes might be ransacked when they returned.

Instead, many chose to stay in hotels and taverns while they were in town. Zac chose one that was neither particularly flashy nor run-down, and quickly paid for a room.

He was starting to get a bit dizzy as he was walking up the stairs, as the constant movement had put a strain on him. He opened the door with shaky hands, and with a muffled groan, he sat down on the floor, finally able to focus on the Dao of Trees.

Time slowly passed, and Zac was extremely relieved to sense that his wound was slowly calming down, allowing him to relax somewhat. However, he didn't dare relent, so he kept his Dao going, even if it was starting to cause some strain. He felt that as long as he could keep this up for a couple more hours, he'd be back in decent shape, to the point he would dare enter the Dead Zone.

But unfortunately, the night wasn't fated to be a quiet one, as the subdued sounds of steps stopped right outside his door.



## NATURE'S BARRIER

Zac frowned as his danger sense flared to life. He quickly rotated his Cosmic Energy, and a few large emerald leaves started to flutter around him as though he were sitting in the middle of a hurricane. The next second, the door exploded into wood chippings as some unknown assailants fired automatic rifles from the other side.

Zac didn't get flustered and instead only slowly got to his feet. Not a single bullet actually hit him, as each and every one was miraculously intercepted by the leaves that were seemingly haphazardly fluttering around him.

It was Zac's second new skill, [**Nature's Barrier**]. It was a high F-graded skill that created a barrier of leaves that automatically intercepted incoming projectiles. Their movements weren't haphazard at all, but rather followed some intricate pattern that Zac still couldn't make heads or tails of.

The leaves were extremely durable, but a few tears started to appear in them from the incessant firing. Almost all the bullets hit true, making Zac believe that the attackers had some sort of class that aided with aim. However, the leaves quickly restored themselves, only at the cost of some Cosmic Energy.

Nature's Barrier wasn't one of the nine high-graded skills in the repository for nothing. It provided an extremely durable extra layer of protection. It also had a few other strong points that suited Zac quite well. The durability of the leaves was based on his Endurance, which was quite unique for barrier spells.

This alone made it worthy of the high-quality evaluation. The stopping power of most spell shields was based on Intelligence, meaning the shields a physical warrior would summon could barely provide any safety.

The leaves could also be empowered with his Dao of Trees, making it a perfect fit. Of course, there was no need to do that for some random rifles. However, after testing the skill out on the island, he'd found that the rounds that the sniper rifles fired would easily penetrate the leaves. So he would need to imbue the skill with his Dao to protect himself from that type of attack.

It was the very same sniper rifles that had prompted Zac to get this skill even though he believed he might get something similar from his class in the future. Zac felt that apart from his high stats, he had no proper way to protect himself from attacks. Even some weaklings had managed to burn through all his defensive charges and almost kill him with the help of three rifles.

The high priest could create a field of fire that incinerated any attack, whereas the Corpselord had turned his very body into a treasure, providing far higher protection than average skills. Even Ogras would have no problem surviving an attack from sniper rifles, as he only needed to meld with the shadows.

Zac waited a second for the shooting to die down before he blasted out the broken door like a raging bull. Outside stood two men, who seemed extremely shocked to see an unscathed Zac emerge. The interruption caused the pain in Zac's side to flare up again, causing a constant annoyance.

A swift slash from a small tomahawk ripped open the throat of one of the attackers, who helplessly slumped down on the floor with a wet gurgling sound. At the same time, Zac grabbed the throat of the other man and dragged him back into the room.

"Who sent you?" Zac asked.

"P-please don't kill me. I was ordered," the man said with horror in his eyes.

“Who?” Zac only repeated while he tightened his grip.

“Lord Perseverance,” the man quickly said, obviously having no problem betraying the town leader. “You flashed a lot of wealth at the clinic, and you hurt both the purifier and a lieutenant.”

Zac shook his head, not too surprised with how things had turned out. He had only hoped that someone who could stay alive this far and even lead a town would have better sense. Zac tightened his grip once more, and this time, the crunch of broken bones could be heard in the room. Zac dropped the corpse on the ground and started to prepare for his next move.

He swapped out his normal boots for the pair that had no soles, which would allow him to use his movement skill. He had a feeling he would need it since the tavern was completely silent. The two had emptied a clip each, yet there was no commotion, clearly indicating something was up.

Finally, he was ready to break out, but before Zac left, he looked down at the two bodies on the floor, some loss in his eyes. It wasn't really sadness over what he'd done, but rather at what he was becoming. Perhaps he hadn't needed to kill those two, but he wouldn't leave any hidden risks. It was based on what Ogras had said during the third wave.

He truly didn't just represent himself anymore. Leaving his enemies alive would be like releasing the wolves back into the mountains. Zac couldn't always be around to protect those close to him, and if he kept being merciful, his friends and family would be in constant danger.

He still didn't take out **[Verun's Bite]** when he exited the room, feeling there was no one in this town who could force him to get serious. A quick glance around showed a completely empty hallway, confirming his suspicion that people had been silently evacuated while he meditated.

With a few quick jumps, he quickly descended the stairs, but a sense of danger made him immediately move away with **[Loamwalker]**. This allowed him to narrowly escape the explosion of a claymore that destroyed the whole set of stairs where he'd stood just now.

Zac frowned as he saw the destruction caused. These zombie hunters were extraordinarily well equipped, it seemed. Zac guessed they had raided some army base in the vicinity since those types of explosives shouldn't just be lying around.

He had no doubt that when he exited the little tavern, there would be a firing squad waiting for him. He wasn't really worried about the outcome, but rather about the rumors that would spread if he went out like a tank and decimated the attackers.

There still weren't too many people who were able to do things like that, and he didn't want to alert either the government or any invaders monitoring his activities.

To get around the problem, Zac simply decided to create his own exit, and with a few slashes and a kick, he walked out of the building from the side and quickly ran away. He heard a shout from behind him, but now that he was out in the open, he wasn't worried they'd catch him.

Zac activated [**Loamwalker**] and sped through a side passage, heading for the edge of town. However, he was interrupted after only ten seconds by an acute pain in his side and the convergence of pathways behind his navel. The agony forced him to slow down to normal speed again.

Zac groaned and touched his side, feeling the deathly chill of Miasma pulsating. He'd already sensed it a bit when he'd used [**Nature's Barrier**], but it truly looked like his wound had reacted to him using Cosmic Energy at the moment. The wound hadn't been like this before back on the island, making the preparations and research he'd done with the help of Ogras and Alea essentially useless.

It was as though a beast had woken up in his wound and started causing all kinds of problems, which no one could have expected. Zac guessed it was because of the spread into the pathway convergence. Any Cosmic Energy that he channeled through those routes would agitate the wound. He had no idea how to remedy the situation, but for now, he needed to get out of here.



Zac was ripping through the streets at breakneck speed even without using his movement skill or Cosmic Energy, empowered only by his overpowered attributes. However, the hunt was on, and two warriors were closing in on motorcycles. Zac wasn't sure how they could find him so easily, but he guessed they either had a drone or some skill that could track him within a certain area.

Zac was in no mood to get entangled with whatever the riders had planned, and took out two pieces of rock he still kept in his bags. He quickly turned around and threw them in quick succession, and the two stones shot like cannonballs into the tires of the motorcycles.

The two pursuers couldn't keep their vehicles under control, even with their improved attributes, and they quickly jumped off the motorcycles, which went out of control, crashing into a storefront. A quick glance back showed that they were scuffed but largely unscathed, and one even readied a gun while rolling. However, Zac rounded a corner, and the shots fired harmlessly hit a wall.

Luckily, the town wasn't too large, and Zac soon found himself at the outer wall. A soldier on guard up on the wall walk heard the commotion of the pursuit and leveled his rifle at Zac and fired. Zac effortlessly dodged the first shots as he took out a tomahawk. With a quick throw, it embedded itself deep into the chest of the guard, who fell over the side with a groan.

Not wanting to stay one more second in this town, Zac climbed up the wall quick like a monkey, turning back to remember the faces of those who tried to kill him. But a sense of danger made him heedlessly throw himself over the edge before he could make out anyone's appearance.

An enormous fireball blasted into the section that Zac had stood on a second earlier, completely erasing the section of the wall. Zac frowned as he looked back up at the wall he'd just fallen from. It appeared there were some competent people in the town after all.

With a grunt, he ripped the tomahawk from the chest of the fallen guard, and from there, ran straight toward the Dead Zone. He ignored the pain in his wound and once again activated [**Loamwalker**] for a whole minute this time in order to create some distance.

As soon as he found a road leading southeast, he took out his car and quickly sped off. As he drove, he once again was able to mainly focus on the Dao of Trees, and he was relieved to feel that the wound was gradually calming down again. It appeared that while circulating Cosmic Energy triggered the wound somewhat, it would eventually calm down to its original state as long as he didn't agitate the infected pathways.

It was completely quiet as Zac sped along through the dead of night, with neither humans nor zombies in sight. Zac knew that this would be the case, as the zombie hunters had essentially cleaned everything out along the rim of the Dead Zone. To find targets, they needed to head further and further in.

It felt a bit shameful to escape in a mad dash instead of just walking out tall and proud. It wasn't like he'd done anything wrong. But it felt too stupid to eradicate a main opposition to the zombies just because one of the lieutenants had been an asshole, creating an unfortunate chain reaction.

Besides, one man fleeing this so-called Lord Perseverance was far less attention-grabbing gossip than one man killing the Lord and his whole army.

Zac kept driving for almost an hour without any lights on, guided only by his keen reflexes and eyesight. However, his mouth curved downward in annoyance as he suddenly saw an array of lights blocking the road ahead.

With a somber expression, he stopped the car and walked out, almost blinded by the light. It felt like there was no point in trying to sneak around, as they clearly knew his location. He needed to clear this situation up unless he wanted to be hounded for days.

Between the floodlights, Zac saw roughly thirty men lined up, armed with both military weapons and things like swords and spears. The vehicles themselves were clearly of army make, reinforcing Zac's belief that this town had ransacked an army base, or perhaps even had been founded by deserted soldiers.

"A lot of trouble for just one person," Zac said with a steady voice as he looked at the captors.

"Oh, Lord Perseverance didn't get his name without reason," a teasing voice answered.

"So what do you want?" Zac asked, trying his hardest to keep his increasingly short fuse in check.

"What do all men want? Beauty, youth, wealth. You, unfortunately, don't have the first two, but I do believe you have the last one," the voice responded, eliciting guffaws from the other bandits.

"We know you have a Cosmos Sack large enough to fit a car. Throw it over, along with everything you wear, and I'll let you leave," the man said, prompting another round of laughs.

Something snapped in Zac, and he wordlessly took out his weapon. This time, it wasn't a tomahawk or the two-handed axe he wore on his back, but **[Verun's Bite]**. He didn't expect any of the men in front of him to tell any tales of his distinctive weapon and fighting style.

Because enough was enough.



## CONQUEST

“Alright, what’s next?” Ogras said with a sigh as he cracked his neck.

It was just like that goddamn man to go gallivanting just when he became a Lord, leaving all the boring work for others. Now Ogras found himself stuck with Adran, who was starting to look more and more disagreeable by the day. A quick look at his new watch told him he’d been stuck in this room for over three hours.

At least the new government building was far better than the stuffy old tent that Adran used before. It was a large four-story structure with quite a few rooms, all nicely ventilated. It was one of the first things they finished outside the wall, as Ogras believed that the growing population needed to feel the power of the government.

“There have been a few complaints by the so-called experts, citing bad working conditions. A few have requested to be sent back to New Washington,” the stocky administrator said after looking at his docket.

Ogras only snorted in derision, showing clearly what he thought about that.

“Everyone is making do with what we have. Cease work on those people’s homes and focus on those who are properly integrating. No point in wasting effort on those kinds of people,” the young demon lord said with a shrug.

There had been some general dissatisfaction amongst the humans after the third wave. The fact that they were almost

overrun by three incursions had frayed their nerves, causing some unrest. The fact that they'd won in just a few hours didn't seem to be much of a comfort for them either.

Ogras had to admit that his actions right after Zac left hadn't helped much. As soon as Zac went on his journey, Ogras gathered every single demon, having each of them swallow a piece of the Springroot. There actually were two who refused, and they were summarily killed without trial.

Next, they walked over and rounded up every single human, who counted over a thousand by now. They were herded to the large square of the academy, mainly to keep people from running away with the help of the gravity array. The same procedure happened there, though Ogras used a bit gentler methods. He only slightly tortured the first ones who refused to eat, instead of outright killing them.

It had turned out that a total of eight people were infiltrators, and Ogras still couldn't be sure if that was all of them. However, having some spies in one's midst was nothing uncommon, so he decided not to waste any more effort on it. Just take those two insistent women who kept pestering him. However, some of the humans had been crying about "human rights violations" or the like, making him want to show them some real violations.

Still, he knew he had to keep himself in check for when Zac came back. The man was still a bit too soft for Ogras' taste, and the demon knew Zac would cause a ruckus if he handled the little humans too roughly. And Ogras really needed to stay on his good side for now.

"Finally, there is the issue of the town that calls itself Refugees' Harbor. Since they are located on one of the closest islands and quite populous, we aimed to integrate them into the array network first, getting access to their manpower. However, two parties have been rebuffed already, refused access to the town. The second time, they were even attacked and forced to flee," Adran continued with a small frown.

"Oh? There was such a thing?" Ogras asked with some interest. "How strong are their forces?"

“From what we can tell, not overly powerful. Their strongest elites are perhaps slightly stronger than the Valkyries. We still have no information about the leader either, as he hasn’t shown himself,” the administrator answered.

Ogras mulled it over as he tapped his fingers against the metallic mold that he had stretching out from his missing forearm. He looked forward to seeing the results of his little experiment.

“Ready the large ship Zac, uh, Lord Atwood bought and fifty soldiers. Ah, bring two squads of the girls as well; might as well give them some experience,” Ogras said as he roused himself with a small smile. “My ass is getting splinters from sitting here day after day. Conquering a town sounds like fun.”

“We did receive reports of something odd going on there,” Adran hesitantly said. “It’s the place with the missing children and adults acting weird.”

“Oh, I’ll bring Janos and Alea as well. They’ll be able to counter any mind-altering things, if that’s what’s going on there,” Ogras said with a shrug as he stood up and left.

As Ogras walked out of the government building, he couldn’t stop himself from throwing a glance at the gaudy tower on the other side of the wall, still spewing out its nauseating rays of light. Just looking at the place made Ogras pissed off. He’d never met as annoying a construct in his life.

Clearly, being stuck in some forgotten pocket of the Multiverse had turned the Tool Spirit insane. However, he really needed to ingratiate himself with it, as he felt the solution to his current problems might be through the repository.

Ogras still remembered the soul-wrenching feeling of standing in front of the Nexus Node, realizing the Ruthless Heavens deemed him unworthy. He’d walked the path of the elite, struggling in the shadows all these years, yet it wasn’t enough.

Not a single upgrade path was available to him at the moment, locking him to the F-grade. He always knew this

might happen, as he followed an incomplete Heritage, yet having it confirmed was a real blow.

At first, he'd lived in denial, hoping that it was the Ruthless Heavens holding him back with its restrictions, but he knew now that wasn't the case. He knew that perhaps all three of the leaders who invaded the island had already evolved, and were only waiting for the System to release the shackles. In fact, it was quite normal to send people right at the precipice of evolving.

It would allow passage through the incursion, and the second they got through to the baby world, they could take the last step into E-grade. From there, they could properly spend their time solidifying their foundations until they could burst out with unprecedented power as soon as the last restrictions were removed. That was one of the reasons that these humans hadn't been erased so far.

Yet he was stuck where he was, unable to take that step. Who knew how long it would take for him to gain whatever was needed to improve. The Fruit of Ascension hadn't been enough. He'd even sacrificed a hand in order to rack up some goddamn achievements, hoping that would allow him to evolve. But not even that was enough for the Ruthless Heavens.

At least he was lucky enough to be able to hide behind a human netherbeast. He needed Zac to keep growing into a true monster until he could solve his current conundrum. Ogras knew that more promising men than him had been stuck on this very step for their whole life until they died, consumed with regret.

Yet Ogras refused to succumb to that fate. His eyes once again moved to the towers in the distance.

### *The Umbra.*

He had been despondent, desperate even, until he saw that inheritance. A new path opened up to him as he read those two words. Those two words might not mean much to others, but to Ogras, it represented the difference between dying a nobody and defying the heavens.



A full inheritance of someone who walked a very similar path as himself. Such a gift was something that essentially everyone in the Multiverse thirsted for. It was far superior to some Dao fruit or Heritages. It could save hundreds, perhaps thousands of years of effort, depending on the grade.

Perhaps it could even give him a large enough boost for him to dare to go through with his quest. He had thought that he wouldn't get any quests for a long while due to his actions in forfeiting the invasion, yet it was there, staring at him.

**[Doubling down (Unique): Slay an Incursion leader.  
Reward: [Tower of Eternity Token], restrictions removed.  
(0/1)]**

Ogras saw it as sort of a test by the Ruthless Heavens, a chance for him to prove it wasn't cowardice or weakness that made him give up on the invasion. However, until he saw the inheritance, he'd simply ignored it. He'd barely survived a fight with one church's generals; how the hell would he survive the big boss?

And don't even mention the tower. He'd spent a large part of his grandfather's savings to be carried to the third floor. He still had one chance left, but as he was now, he knew that going back wouldn't allow him to go any further on the merits of his own power.

But armed with an inheritance? That was another matter completely. Even more, if he managed to drag a certain human with him to walk in front of him to take the brunt of the trial...

Ogras couldn't help feeling the universe was paving a true path of supremacy for him, and couldn't help whistling a tune as he walked toward the house of the old goat. He was thinking of bringing him along. Not because he really needed an experienced sailor, but rather that he enjoyed Sap Trang's company.

"... so anyway, don't mention that... appearance... to Lord Atwood, or you will be spending the rest of your short life on the toilet," a familiar voice could be heard from inside the small hut the fisherman had built for himself.

Intrigued, Ogras melded into the shadows as he slipped into the house.

“Little lass, no need for threats. But you know, you shouldn’t keep secrets from your significant other. If he truly likes you, he won’t mind you are a swamp monster,” Mr. Sap said, looking troubled.

Alea looked extremely annoyed at the fisherman’s comment.

“He’s not... Well, anyway, I am no swamp monster. It’s just some complications from my class I am working out. Lord Zac doesn’t need to know about it until I’ve fixed it, okay? And you, why are you hiding in the shadows?” Alea said as she swirled around to the shadows in the corner.

Ogras was a bit embarrassed but didn’t let it show as he walked out of the shadows.

“Let’s go. We have a town to conquer. And the old goat’s right. Why not just stay in your real body for now instead of wasting all that Cosmic Energy? He’s not even here.”

“It’s NOT my real body!” Alea raged. “And I can’t have people talking. Whatever, let’s go.”

With that, she simply grabbed the collar of the old fisherman, who helplessly followed the two.

Next, the three walked over to the academy, intent on bringing a few of the little spear girls. They had just gotten their classes, and some real battle might remind them they weren’t immortals just yet.

“We only take orders from Lord Zac,” one of the leaders simply said after Ogras told them about the mission.

Ogras didn’t know her name, since he hadn’t bothered learning any of them, but he couldn’t help cursing Zac as he looked at the small army. He had all these girls willingly entering contracts with him, yet he only stayed by himself in his large empty castle. Perhaps he really was a monk.

“Well, that might be true, but Ilvere and Alyn take orders from me,” Ogras said with a small smile. “I hear you want to

go to the Ratmen Incursion in a week? It would be a shame if those two said you weren't ready."

The Valkyries angrily glared at him for a bit before they reluctantly started to get their gear.

"Don't be so glum. We're going to liberate a town that refuses to acknowledge your great Lord," Ogras said with a laugh after seeing their faces, which actually seemed to improve their mood.

In just two hours, the awe-inspiring carrack set out, slicing through the waters. It was manned by a group of eager demons and two squads of Valkyries, who not only balefully glared at Ogras but at Alea as well.

The girls were in a generally competitive mood against the poison mistress, as she went over to the academy every now and then to "improve their natural poison resistance," as she called it. Ogras knew it was more about marking territories, but he didn't really care.

It took a few hours, but soon they found themselves outside the gates of Refugees' Harbor. Ogras considered just blasting a hole in the whole thing with the ship's weapons, but reluctantly decided against it. He was sure it would end with some dragged-out lecture, or even worse: a long bout of wordless brooding from Zac when he got back.

Instead, he anchored some distance away from the town and only left a skeleton crew to man its cannons in case they would be needed after all. The rest followed him toward the gates. Ogras threw a disdainful glance at the scared-looking guards standing on top of the wall, and with a shake of his head, took a step forward.

He guessed he'd have to at least give them a chance to surrender.



## SHAMELESSNESS

“You know who we are. Open the gate, or we’ll open it for you,” Ogras said with a loud voice, looking up at the hapless guards.

There was no response for a few seconds, and the silence stretched on as the humans up on the wall looked at each other with despondent faces. Ogras was almost thankful for their inaction, as it would save a lot of time in the end.

“Very well, thank you for making this easy,” Ogras said with a shrug as the gate was drowned in darkness.

Constant sounds of wood breaking and splintering could be heard as the thick gate was impaled by numerous shadow spears. Shouts erupted from the wall, and a few attempted to stop Ogras’ attack. A few arrows and ineffectual spells sailed toward him, but Ogras effortlessly ignored them without breaking a sweat.

The demons didn’t stay passive when they saw their general being attacked, and a multitude of far more powerful attacks blasted into the wall, completely decimating the top sections of it. Screams and wails could be heard, but Ogras didn’t care as he stepped forward. It felt nice not to be the defender for once, but the conqueror.

Step by step, he walked through the remains of the gate, his shadows suffocating the small fires that had started from the spells. The demons followed behind him, and finally, the Valkyries walked in the rear with troubled countenances.

One by one, they stepped through the wall of smoke into the town proper and found themselves face-to-face with around two hundred warriors. They looked scared, but they stood their ground, surprising Ogras somewhat.

“Please, we just want to live our lives in peace. Why do you need to keep coming here?” a woman in the front shouted with red-rimmed eyes.

“Well, if it doesn’t suit you, then you’re welcome to swim out of our sphere of influence,” Ogras answered with a smile. “But as long as you stay in Lord Atwood’s kingdom, you will need to follow his laws.”

“Since when is this area under the influence of demons? We never agreed to follow one of your kind,” another man with a large sword shouted back.

“Then you’ll be happy to learn that Lord Atwood is a bona fide human. Now let me ask you something. Where are all the children?” Ogras retorted.

The defenders looked at each other with troubled faces, apparently readying themselves for a fight.

“Why do you want to know that? There’s no need for you to bother our children,” the woman aggressively shot back, fear covering her face.

“Well, depending on what you did with them, we will either kill you all, or we’ll—” Ogras didn’t get further as Janos walked up and coughed next to him.

“Something... off. Catch me one?” a voice suddenly said next to him, making Ogras turn to the taciturn Illusionist.

“You’re saying they are under an illusion?” Ogras asked with a low voice.

“Maybe. Saw glimmer in eyes. Mind control,” Janos answered with a small shrug.

Ogras thought it over for a second until he turned his gaze to a building that was placed just behind the defending army. With a slight exertion, he managed to extend his shadows all

the way over there, and with a few well-placed stabs, he destroyed the supporting beams of the structure.

The house soon collapsed with a large crash, making many of the defenders worriedly turn around, afraid of getting ambushed. Ogras took advantage of the brief lapse of focus to flash over and grab the woman in the front. Shadows swirled all around her in a fraction of a second, and she was completely immobilized as Ogras teleported back to his own side.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING? RELEASE ME!” she shouted and tried to frenetically rip free from her binding.

The shout made the humans finally realize what had just happened, and a few shouted some weak demands to release her. Ogras only snorted and nodded at Janos, who walked over and touched her forehead. She quickly calmed down, and her face gained a wooden expression, devoid of any life.

“Ask now,” Janos said and backed away.

“What’s your name?” Ogras asked the woman placed in a trance.

It was one of Janos’ more convenient skills. The only downside was that there had to be quite a difference in attributes between the Illusionist and the target for it to work. Besides, even weaklings with extremely strong convictions or wills could break out of it, though this woman seemed to possess neither.

“Katherine,” she mumbled without changing her expression.

“What happened to the children of this town? Are they dead?” Ogras asked.

Ogras knew that if these people had killed all the kids, then Zac would have personally eradicated everyone here, so it would make his life quite easy. They could simply mow every combatant down, construct a teleporter, and be back before supper. But if not, perhaps the situation was more complicated.

“He’s holding them captive. We need to follow his orders, or he’ll hurt them. He ordered us to make you leave,” she said,

some fear once again emerging on her face.

“Who’s he?” Ogras asked, intrigued.

It took a special level of scum to go through with that kind of plan, and Ogras was almost impressed.

“The lord, Lord of Eyes. He’ll hurt them unless we do what he says,” she repeated.

“Why don’t you just kill him, and you’ll all be free?” Alea asked as she stepped forward.

“We can’t. It would harm the children,” she said with a frantic shake of her head.

“Why?”

“It...” the woman began, but started frowning in confusion.

“Hypnotic suggestion,” Janos said.

“What?” Ogras asked, slightly annoyed that the man still hadn’t worked out his speech impairment after all these years.

“Protective measure. Implant suggestion. Can’t attack, fail,” the Illusionist said with a pained face.

“He’s saying that his lord has implanted the townspeople with a hypnotic suggestion. An attempt to kill him or rescue the children will end in failure and even kill the children,” Alea translated, being used to Janos’ stilted speech.

“Then why bother with kidnapping the children? Can’t he just hypnotize them to follow his orders?” Ogras asked skeptically, feeling that the whole thing sounded like a pain in the ass.

“Weak hypnotist, too many, too big suggestion,” Janos said.

Ogras finally understood what was going on. Hypnosis generally wasn’t some supreme skill that could make people, especially strong cultivators, believe or do anything. Hypnosis was essentially tricking the brain, not forcing it to believe something. No hypnotist could make a man kill himself, for example, as that would go against the primal instinct of them.



However, this Lord of Eyes had found a pretty smart solution. He didn't implant a suggestion that tried to force them into unconditional surrender, but a suggestion that an attack on him would end with the hostages dying. For all people knew, it might actually be true, so implanting it would be far easier than saying that the Lord was simply invincible.

It was an extra layer of protection the hypnotist created for himself on top of having actual hostages. Ogras' brows rose at the realization, as this level of cowardice was something else. Still, the man couldn't be a complete weakling if he not only managed to capture all the kids but even managed to implant the whole town with suggestions.

He only hesitated for a second before he put on his **[Circlet of Tranquility]**. It was the same item he'd used before to protect himself against mental attacks, and it also worked against mind control. It might be an over-the-top measure against some random hypnotist, but he wouldn't gamble with his little life. It would be a true embarrassment if he was hypnotized by some hack at an isolated town on a baby world. He might just as well kill himself from embarrassment.

"Where is this Lord of Eyes now?" Ogras asked next.

"He's hiding in the library," the woman answered, her face once again having turned expressionless.

"I'll be right back," Ogras said as he looked at the building the captive indicated.

"Do you need help?" Alea asked, but only received a small laugh as an answer as the shadows swallowed Ogras.

In no time, he walked amongst the bookcases, the claws on his feet creating a clacking sound in the otherwise silent library. Rows and rows of dusty books lined the building, actually making Ogras a bit excited.

This baby planet was far more interesting than he ever could have imagined. The poor saps lived their whole lives without a speck of Cosmic Energy, yet they had created so many fun things. The almost endless numbers of movies and

shows were a testament to this, but that only scratched the surface.

Lately, he'd asked around a bit about the history of the world from various humans, mainly the congenial one currently running the tavern, and what he'd learned truly astounded him. The humans of planet Earth had a shorter history than his own clan, yet they had gone from cavemen to taking the first steps of discovering the Multiverse.

Who knew, if they had been left alone for another few thousand years, they might actually have become a new lineage of the Technocrats. He wondered just how they could be so industrious. A few thousand years was just a blink in the history of his own home world, and nothing really changed.

Perhaps a few wars would take place, and a few new clans emerge. Perhaps there was something in the air of this world making the humans so restless, forcing them to keep reinventing themselves.

He truly looked forward to perusing this library, but that would have to be saved for another day. He kept scanning the building with **[Omniscient Eyes]** until they fell upon a certain bookcase against a wall. His mouth tugged upwards, and he walked over. He gripped the wooden bookcase with a hand and simply flung it away, not bothering with finding the hidden mechanic.

Behind the bookcase was a drape, hiding the entrance to a small room. When Ogras pushed the garment to the side, he saw a grimy-looking man wearing rags sitting pathetically in a corner.

"Wha—please, spare me! I'm just a nobody, tending the books," the man cried with a wretched appearance.

"Spare the waterworks. The Lord of Eyes, I presume?" Ogras said as he stepped into the small hideout.

"What? No, I'm Gregor, the librarian," he answered with a confused face, but before he could continue, a spear of shadows penetrated his leg, making him shriek in pain.

“Don’t waste my time, I want to be home before dinner. Where are you keeping the kids?” Ogras said as he looked down on the prompt showing above the man.

**Gregor Johnsson.**

**Level: 34**

**Class: Hypnotist (Uncommon).**

**Most used skill: Seed of Suggestion**

**Highest Attribute: Wisdom**

“Wait, okay, it’s me. But know that if I’m harmed any further, the children will all die. We are linked through my mental hive skill,” the man said between gritted teeth.

Ogras snorted as he felt the gem on his circlet heat up, and from how hot it got, he realized that it was actually a quite strong attack. The man must have leveled up his [**Seed of Suggestion**] skill to at least a high level from using it on the whole town.

“Don’t bother using your Seed of Suggestion skill like on the villagers. And even if your little suggestion was true, what would I care about some human brats dying?” Ogras said as another leg of the hypnotist was gored.

The man was now wailing and crying on the floor, sounding like he’d been put through the thousand tortures.

“Please, no more. I’ll do whatever. I’ll work for you! The kids are hidden in the town hall. There’s a hidden bomb shelter in the basement. They’re there,” Gregor cried, tears and snot freely running down his face.

“It’s a shame; someone like you would make a decent asset. This level of shamelessness is in a way a strength. But I don’t want to rock the boat with the little Lord at the moment. I have an inheritance to receive, after all. So my apologies,” Ogras said with a somewhat regretful face.

The Lord of Eyes confusedly opened his mouth, but before he could speak, a large shadow spear impaled his torso, completely skewering him. A small burst of Cosmic Energy entered Ogras’ body, but it soon dissipated out of his body

once again, reminding him of his predicament of being stuck at the bottleneck.

Ogras placed the corpse in his bag and returned to the armies, who were still at a standstill.

“It’s done. The kids are in the basement of the town hall over there. Hidden bomb shelter,” Ogras said as he appeared.

From there, it didn’t take long to sort everything out. When Ogras showed the corpse of the Lord of Eyes, chaos took hold of the defending army, with everyone crying that the children were doomed. Only when the Valkyries and a few demons were leading out roughly three hundred haggard, but living, children would they calm down.

The Hypnotist was dead, but the suggestions still lingered in their minds, though they would dispel by themselves over time, according to Janos. The Illusionist also walked around and helped to speed along the process, and soon a few people, including the formerly captured woman, stood in front of Ogras and the others.

“Thank you for releasing us from this mental prison, and sorry about the way we acted earlier,” the woman said with some embarrassment.

“It’s no problem. Lord Atwood would surely have come to your aid sooner if we knew what was going on here. Since your town appeared fine on the surface, we mainly focused on saving those facing death on the other islands,” Ogras said with a straight face. “I’m surprised you are so calm facing us demons. Most humans are a bit more... shocked.”

“Well, we only met the beastkin in the Tutorial, but I guess you’re another of the new races sharing the fused world?” the woman asked.

“Uh, right. You actually have cultivators here?” Ogras asked, intrigued.

“Yes, roughly two thousand of us are cultivators,” she answered as a matter of course, but Ogras could barely contain his surprise.

This could only mean that Refugees' Harbor was a drop-off site for a human Tutorial group. It explained why the town was largely fine when most of the humans they'd scooped up on the various islands were on their last legs. But before he could ask any follow-up questions, a beautiful, but dirty woman somewhere in her twenties pushed herself to the forefront of the cultivators of Refugees' Harbor.

"Please excuse me! You said that the Lord's name is Atwood? Is it Zachary Atwood?" she asked with a hesitant face.

"Why do you know that name? Who are you?" Ogras asked with a frown.

"I'm Hannah, Zac's girlfriend."



## BALANCE

A horrifying pressure spread out from Zac as he stepped forward with [**Verun's Bite**] in his hands. The previously rowdy squad from Perseverance didn't have time to react before he was upon them. A horizontal swing of [**Chop**] ripped through most of the group, crushing hastily erected defenses like dry twigs.

"Attack!" the voice from earlier frantically cried, no longer having any joviality in it.

However, it was to no avail as a dozen glittering leaves whirled around Zac as he methodically cut down everything. Spells and bullets flew through the night, but the defensive skill of Zac proved its worth as the attacks were continuously blocked. The few that snuck by couldn't really hurt Zac either, as between his monstrous Endurance and E-grade robes, he was nigh invulnerable to ordinary attacks.

A car door slammed and an engine started, clearly indicating someone had quickly grown tired of the fight. Zac only shook his head with some regret and detached his fractal edge, letting it cut the military vehicle and its driver in half. He would actually already have finished the fight if it wasn't for the fact that he didn't want to damage the vehicles.

They would be a great asset to his town, as he didn't have many good vehicles at the moment. With some inscriptions and the engine modifications, they would be great tools for his force to explore and traverse the main continent in the future. After all, it seemed the Creators wouldn't sell any land

vehicles. The next step after the ships would be the flying Spirit Tools, but that was extremely far off.

There were roughly thirty people who were part of the ambush, but the fight only lasted for less than a minute before the night once again was blanketed in deathly silence. Corpses were strewn all over, some as far as a few hundred meters away from the blockade. After the initial rampage, a few had tried to flee, but between **[Loamwalker]** and the fractal edge projectiles Zac shot out, none survived.

However, the battle wasn't completely without consequence, as Zac was panting with a pallid face. He'd tried to end it as quickly as possible in order to not let his wound go out of control again, but there was no stopping it as a horrible pain spread through his body.

Worse yet, it started to absorb Miasma as well. It seemed like something in the wound had turned into almost a small whirlpool, slowly rotating while drawing in the deathly energy in the atmosphere into his pathways. Luckily, the Dao of Trees blocked out a good chunk of it, forming a natural barrier.

After a brief hesitation, he chose not to head out of the Dead Zone. Between the Cleansing Pill he'd eaten back on the island, the purifier's efforts, and his Dao, it would take weeks before the concentration of Miasma reached the levels of concentration it had right at the beginning. Besides, the wound had calmed down after a while the last time, so hopefully, the same would happen again.

Still, he didn't wish to remain at the scene of the battle. It looked like only the leader who spoke in the beginning had a semblance of power, whereas the others were normal foot soldiers. Most used machine guns rather than skills, showing that their power was limited. The huge fireball that had almost blasted him up on the wall of Perseverance was still fresh in his mind. He wasn't in the mood to take one of those blasts at the moment, as the leaves wouldn't do much against such an attack.

Zac therefore quickly collected all the vehicles in his greatest Cosmos Sack, gaining ten military jeeps. After a brief



hesitation, he also threw in the bodies of all the men as well, not wanting to leave them to give clues of what had happened here. He wanted to leave the so-called Lord Perseverance with some doubt, and if he was smart, he'd cut his losses.

Besides, even if they were enemies, they were all humans. To leave them here would mean they'd turn into zombies eventually. He'd make sure that they would rest in peace instead. He didn't bother cleaning up the scene any more than that, though, leaving the scars and cracks left from his and the others' attacks. Finally, he put his own car into a sack and brought out a new one.

It was one of the few vehicles that already was modified to run on crystals instead of gas. Earlier, he'd used a normal one since he expected to enter a town, but now he had no such compunctions. Gas was scarce, and he didn't want to waste it, while he had an almost endless number of crystals. Besides, the car running on Cosmic Energy had another advantage. It made almost no sound, even less so than an electric car.

Zac swooshed along the road, a silent specter in the night. However, a frown started to emerge on his face, as the wound wasn't calming down and instead kept rotating and absorbing Miasma. He thought about stopping, but he still was quite close to the border town. Instead, he kept driving for another two hours until the first rays of daylight started to push through the thick gray clouds that seemed to cover the Dead Zone.

At that moment, he stopped the car and put it into a Cosmos Sack, and he walked into the forest next to the road. Even with some sunlight, it felt like the Dead Zone was blanketed in an endless gloom, the combination of Miasma and the thick clouds creating a sort of natural barrier against the suns.

As he walked along the forest, he also noted that widespread terraforming was taking place inside. He still was quite far out in the edge of the domain of the undead forces, but the trees had already started to transform. They had long lost their leaves, it seemed, though Zac couldn't tell whether it was due to the Miasma or winter's approach.

Since Zac had Dao of Trees, he could somewhat sense how the trees were faring, and he wasn't surprised when he felt that most of the trees were dead or on the verge of dying. However, there were some that defiantly struggled on in the face of death, actually somehow gaining strength from the struggle. Others had simply mutated and seemed to be quietly absorbing Miasma as nourishment. As he saw it, he was reminded of the adage that life finds a way.

After having walked for thirty minutes, he felt confident that he was both far from any civilization, meaning he shouldn't run into any zombies, and far enough into no-man's-land that no zombie hunters should find him. Therefore, he started to look around for a place to camp.

He still hadn't slept during the night, as he had been busy trying to calm down his wound earlier. Even with his stats, he was starting to get tired, and he didn't want to risk losing focus inside an incursion. He looked around a bit, and finally, he found a tree that stood tall and proud, actually still having its leaves on its branches.

It was one of the trees that had found a way to combat the Miasma. Zac didn't really understand how, but after holding his hands to it for a while, it almost felt like it slowly transformed the deathly energy back into normal Cosmic Energy. It was essentially the reverse of what zombies and unholy beacons did.

Zac was also happy to sense that the Miasma actually was quite a bit sparser around the tree, prompting him to sit down and rest his back against the thick trunk. Still, even with the better environment, his wound wouldn't stop absorbing Miasma.

Until now, he'd held back on trying to cut out whatever was in the wound, as the demon physician had noted it might come with unexpected side effects. It was a bit like preparing a fugu fish; one wrong cut and the whole fish would turn poisonous. There was a risk of the same happening to Zac, so he'd decided on slowly healing.

However, things had changed since the purifier had tried fixing him. It wasn't slowly getting better like before, but rather getting worse. It felt like a ball of death was brewing in the core of his being, its pulsating echoing the wound itself. Had that Corpselord perhaps unleashed his final attack with the goal of turning him into some special zombie by forming a mutated Miasma Core in his body?

Zac had seen the effect of Miasma poisoning firsthand, and had no desire to become the walking dead. He'd fight tooth and nail to fix that thing, and if failed, he'd at least reach his sister and get her to safety before worrying about anything else.

He was tired, but before sleeping, he'd give it a try. He took out a knife he'd prepared for just this occasion, along with some bandages and a flashlight. Next he took off all his clothes on his torso, displaying the wound in the cold air.

It truly looked ghastly, a black hole with tendrils spreading out from it. After a brief touch, it didn't feel hot like an infection, but rather a numbing cold. This much was the same as before, but with the added effect of the wound physically pulsating, it looked quite a bit scarier.

The disgusting sight only reaffirmed Zac's decision, and with a somber expression, he disinfected the knife before he gingerly cut into his flesh right outside the core of the wound. His plan was to quickly cut out the center and then slowly heal the tendrils after the main part of the wound was gone.

However, he only managed to cut a centimeter into his body before a wave of pain unlike anything he'd felt before flooded his mind, overloading his system. Zac had no way to produce any semblance of a response as his eyes rolled up into his head, and he collapsed back against the tree, unconscious.

The suns were already quite high in the sky when Zac woke up again with a start, and he was surprised to see that he'd actually slept for five hours. It was far longer compared to the two to three hours he usually slept nowadays, and he guessed it was since he wasn't in great condition.

After making sure nothing in his surroundings was amiss, he quickly looked down at his wound and breathed in relief that his little experiment didn't seem to have made anything worse. The black core was still slowly pulsating, but it hadn't spread while he was knocked out.

A quick internal check also showed that his body didn't contain any more Miasma compared to earlier. In fact, it almost seemed there was less of it than before in his body. Unfortunately, he still felt the infected ball in the core of his being, and Zac guessed that was where all the missing Miasma went. As he dressed again, he pondered on his next step.

He was truly walking along blind, not knowing what the hell the thing in his body was. It was quite unfortunate that neither Calrin nor Ogras could figure anything out. The undead faction was extremely vast with tens of thousands of classes and means, and there was no way they could find out exactly what he'd been struck by.

It also was quite hard for the gnome to buy anything used for purifying the Miasma. The Undead Empire saw those types of pills as a direct affront to their faction, and selling those types of things as an attack on them. The pills themselves weren't hard to make, but few were willing to draw the undeads' ire for the limited revenue that came with the purifying pills.

Zac sighed and rested his head back against the large tree again, closing his eyes. It truly was a marvelous specimen, surviving in this harsh climate. The suns were obscured, and the energy in the atmosphere was corrupted, yet the tree pushed forward, not giving up. Zac thought of trying to glean any hints from it, and entered a meditative state as he tried to understand what the tree actually was doing.

The hours passed, and soon the small Dao field he had erected around his wound started to change. Before, it was like a cloud that blocked Miasma from entering the wound, but since the cloud was porous, some snuck through. However, the cloud started to transform, turning into a small whirlpool as well, moving in the opposite direction from the whirl in his wound.



## DISRUPT THE CALL

Zac felt he'd stumbled upon something important as he slowly controlled the Dao of Trees to rotate over the wound. It was a way of manipulation of the Dao that he'd never done before. Usually, he just pushed the Dao into his attack or his body, but now he realized that type of usage probably could be likened to back when he had been alone on the island.

The way he'd used Cosmic Energy at the start was to simply push it into his arms and legs to run faster and punch harder. There was no refinement or finesse to it, and most of the energy was wasted. However, using it in a controlled manner, such as through skills, showed far higher effectiveness.

It seemed that it was the same with the Dao. Even though he was anxious to get going, he felt it was critical to test this further, so he slowly manipulated the little whirlpool containing his Dao of Trees. Eventually, he managed to manipulate it slightly, such as growing or making it smaller.

More importantly, as he kept the small Dao field spinning over his wound, Zac noticed that keeping it going was almost effortless. He still hadn't really understood exactly what the power from Dao was. Ogras called it the Power of Laws, whereas Calrin mentioned Spirit. Zac himself thought of it as mental energy.

In any case, the consumption of mental energy seemed far lower when he'd turned the Dao field into a small whirlwind, as though the spinning was keeping the field from dissipating on its own. Zac only needed to supply it with a bit of energy

every now and then to keep the rotation going. It was far more efficient than wasting a lot of energy to keep a blob of Dao covering the wound for a while, and then rest a bit as the wound grew worse again.

Feeling he was onto something big, Zac also tried to manipulate his Dao in other ways before he set out. Unfortunately, a crude swirl was the limit of his abilities for the moment. It all turned into a mess the moment he tried forming anything more refined, like controlling thin strands that could fit in his pathways or drawing patterns with his Mental Energy.

Having finally found a way to combat, or at least stem, the corruption, he got up to his feet and started to walk away. However, he quickly walked back and cut off a few saplings from the tree, as the mutation was worth further study. It had even opened up a new avenue for him in a sense, showing a possible direction of how to take his Dao one step further.

Without death, there can be no life. The tree had taken that even further, as it created life out of death, converting Miasma to Cosmic Energy. It was like the seasons, the death of winter turning into the warm life of summer. He felt it was very possible to use this concept in improving his Dao of Trees, though he wasn't quite there yet.

Zac kept going southeast through the forest, not bothering going back to the road. It didn't make much difference in speed whether he drove over broken-down roads or sped through the forest on foot, at least not now when his wound was under control.

Had this been a year or so ago, he'd be extremely freaked out by the gloomy atmosphere, but now it barely registered, as most of his mind was preoccupied with the Dao of Trees. If he wasn't on a clock, he would have secluded himself right at this moment, trying to formalize the wisp of insight he'd gained as he'd sat under the resisting tree.

However, time waits for no man. There were myriad things he needed to get done. The first and foremost was finding Kenzie, but that was just the start. Next thing on his list was

the sovereignty quest. There was a one-month time limit on it, so he needed to finish it quickly. It was only called the first step, which made it sound like a classic quest chain.

But even though it was only the first step, it gave extravagant rewards, making Zac extremely curious as to what other things were waiting down the road. It was also quite welcome, considering that soon there was the global treasure.

He had been hemming and hawing whether he should go or not, especially now that it looked like he'd become a persona non grata with the government. But it was starting to feel like he didn't have much of a choice but to go. The weight of responsibility was starting to push down on him. He simply wasn't strong enough at the moment.

He might be strong compared to some rabble, or even on Earth in general. Yet he'd barely managed to fight off the Corpselord, who wasn't even the leader of the incursion. That was only one of the incursions, and beyond that were the Dominators, who were suspiciously silent.

The Treasure Hunt was supposed to give unique opportunities to gain power, and he couldn't afford not to go anymore, no matter what he personally wanted to do. He would just have to keep his head down and fight for opportunities and hopefully not get dragged into any large-scale conflict.

Of course, all this meant nothing if he got himself killed before the time of the hunt. His wound was contained for now, but it ultimately felt like a stopgap solution.

Four days quickly passed, and Zac felt he was making good time through the Dead Zone. He'd been afraid that he would be bogged down by endless waves of zombies, but he barely saw a single one. Then again, it made sense since the incursion had grown way out of proportion, being almost as large as the old United States in landmass.

Still, with his superhuman attributes, he'd crossed around half of the Dead Zone, as he guessed he was somewhat near the core by now. Just two or three days of travel to the southwest and he should be right at the Nexus Hub that would



be at the core of the undead incursion. Of course, he was heading east, almost in the opposite direction. For the moment, he had no interest in meeting the real core forces of the Undead Empire.

Most of the area he walked through was pure wilderness, and he skirted around the towns and hovels he passed while he traveled. He assumed that the zombies would be gathered in the towns, as those who wandered out into the wild would likely be picked off by the wandering beasts.

Zac did, however, get accosted by mutated beasts every now and then, frenziedly trying to ravage him. Zac quickly dispatched the monsters, not bothering with collecting their bodies. They were teeming with Miasma, making the meat inedible unless you were desperate. Especially since yesterday, the monsters had grown particularly wretched, as the concentration of Miasma had grown far higher. As for their hides, Zac already had a mountain of those from the wolf hordes.

Since there were almost no impediments to his travels, he decided to take a few extra hours a day to work on his Dao. Being forced to ceaselessly combat the surrounding Miasma had one strong point. It was continuously sharpening his mind. He still didn't know the ins and outs of the soul and the Dao, but it did seem like his spirit or whatever was slowly getting strengthened by this environment.

The deathly energy of the corrupted Cosmic Energy was also a great contrast to his Dao of Trees, which was a subcategory of the Dao of Nature or the Dao of Life.

They were almost opposites, and seeing the two forces combat each other through the whirling vortices kept giving Zac new insights. It was on the third day he realized that while the two forces were restricting each other, they also were empowering each other in a sense.

Some of the Miasma was still entering him, even with his Dao whirl keeping vigil, but Zac initially didn't care, as the Dao of Trees purified a bit of the energy in the wound as well. However, it was clear that he was absorbing more than he was

purifying. And even then, he actually felt a bit better as the small ball of death beneath his navel seemingly swallowed any energies that entered through his wound or pores.

As he pushed through the wilderness, he pondered on the implications. The wound was acting up less and less as his control of his Dao increased, but the energy had to go somewhere. He was starting to get worried that something was accumulating inside him, but a loud explosion dragged him out of his thoughts.

The explosion clearly didn't come from a natural source, and though Zac generally wanted to avoid problems, he curiously moved toward the source of the sound. In just a few seconds, a large plume of smoke rose in the air in the distance, giving him a clear direction.

As he moved forward through the gloomy forest, he started to hear the sound of machine guns incessantly firing. Zac was surprised, as he didn't expect human activity this far into the Dead Zone. He'd moved quite quickly, sleeping only a few hours each day for four days now, bringing him far into undead territory.

There should be good targets quite a bit further out with many towns being overrun by zombies, so there weren't many reasons for zombie hunters to venture this far inside. It exponentially increased the risk of running into something dangerous, like the core invaders themselves. Besides, Zac had already run into two beasts that were quite a bit stronger than the tiger that had caused John so much trouble, so the undead weren't the only thing to worry about.

The gunfighting sounded more and more intense as Zac increased his pace through the forest until he finally reached the edge of the woods, the decaying trees giving way to what once might have been vast paddies, perhaps for growing rice. The vast irrigated field had turned into sickly puddles with thick fog wafting above it.

However, the fields weren't what garnered Zac's attention. Rather, it was the huge swarm of zombies walking together, and the people desperately trying to impede their march.

However, even with zombies dropping every second, the number was just unimaginable. The number of zombies couldn't even be put in the same category as those that had invaded his island. If Zac had to guess, there had to be at least half a million of them stumbling along.

It was an ocean of the undead, and the only solace was that there seemingly weren't any aberrations or Corpse Golems amongst the ranks. There were, however, a few zombies who stood out from the mindless masses, and every now and again, one would leap out from the ranks and try to snag one of the humans running along with the horde.

The resistance consisted of roughly three hundred people of mostly Asian descent, who kept moving along the flanks of the huge swarm of the undead, using various means of downing one zombie after another. Zac was a bit confused why they fought so hard, though, as it seemed the endless hordes of undead were stumbling toward the core of the Dead Zone rather than out toward the settlements.

Perhaps they simply tried to impede whatever was going on. Nothing good could come from hundreds of thousands of zombies gathering together, after all. If so, Zac could only salute their brave efforts. Normally, he would have helped, but between his wound and his mission, he decided that this was a battle he would simply have to bow out from.

He was about to recede into the forest and walk around the army, but a prompt in front of him suddenly appearing stopped him in his tracks.

**[Disrupt the Call (Unique, Limited): The Undead are gathering. As a Lord of the living, spearhead the efforts to impede their progress. Slay 10,000 undead within ten minutes. Reward: 10 Supreme-quality Purification pills (0/10,000) NOTE: Failure to complete quest results in your location and status being shared with the Lords of Undeath for 7 days.]**

“SHIT!” Zac roared with frustration as he took out his axe while balefully glaring at the zombie horde.



## SUI

Sui sighed as she reloaded her rifle once again. Bullets were running low, as they'd harried the endless hordes for days now. Unfortunately, she had no alternative, as her skills were used for healing rather than killing, meaning she didn't even gain any experience from her attacks.

She didn't really care about that, but what she was doing left a sour taste in her mouth. She'd originally ventured out into the Dead Zone in order to find a cure for her people, not to hunt them like animals. But still she kept going, slowly firing one bullet after another, taking great care to hit the brains of the undead in order to save on ammunition. Because like it or not, they had to do something.

Yet it felt like they barely made a dent in their ranks with their tireless efforts. In fact, she suspected there were actually more of them now than when they began, simply since the undead numbers were bolstered as groups kept merging.

She was traveling with the scouts who were the first amongst those to realize what was happening. The dead were organizing. They'd heard rumors of zombies being gathered up by elite undead who were passing through an area, but nothing like what they were experiencing now. It was as though all the dead were receiving some call, and mindlessly headed toward some destination in the central zone.

Even the elite zombies weren't immune to whatever was beckoning them, as they too walked inside the ranks, hiding amongst their mindless brethren.

Though the small resistance army that gathered from four frontier villages knew they were shooting at their countrymen, there was nothing to be done. They couldn't let the situation progress unimpeded.

Not that many of them minded, Sui noted with a sigh, looking over at the tired but gleeful faces of a few of the zombie hunters. They couldn't care less about why the towns took action. They only cared about the fact that there suddenly were free targets just mindlessly wandering forward, largely ignoring the fact that they were getting attacked.

They likely saw it as free money. They only needed to survive the occasional attacks from the evolved zombies as they kept cutting down the lower zombies, not caring that they were once someone's family members.

“Shit!” a roar suddenly could be heard from behind them, startling the hunters close by.

Sui quickly swiveled her gun around, only to see a Caucasian man with long hair and madness in his eyes rush toward the zombie horde with an axe in his hand.

“Stop, it's too dangerous! There are elite zombies inside!” she shouted in English, trying to stop the lunatic's charge.

However, it was to no avail, as he kept running, a growl echoing in his wake. However, the expected scene of a man being swallowed by a sea of zombies after desperately swinging his axe for a few seconds didn't happen. Her eyes widened in shock as she bore witness to a level of carnage she'd never dreamed possible.

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Zac gritted his teeth as he pushed into the zombie horde, enraging the closest undead with his aura of life. With the time limit the System gave him, there was no time to worry about exposing himself in front of the humans, so he rotated his Cosmic Energy to immediately create five huge fractal blades.

He let the five blades rip through the air with a speed that made his arms look like a blur as they each carved a path of bisected bodies and pools of putrid blood. However, even with over a hundred of them dying he'd barely made a dent in the army. A large surge of Cosmic Energy entered his body, as even the gain from killing weak zombies was noticeable when he instantly killed dozens of them.

However, Zac almost paused his charge when he noted that Cosmic Energy wasn't the only thing that entered him when he killed the undead. Along with the energy, there were also large amounts of Miasma piggybacking into his body.

He'd never noticed something like that when he'd killed the beasts during the past days, but perhaps it worked differently when fighting true undead rather than corrupted beasts. Zac's mind frantically tried to figure out what to do, but he could only push more mental energy into fortifying the Dao swirl as he kept going. He couldn't stop now, as failure wasn't an option.

In order to quickly reach new targets, he also used **[Loamwalker]** to shorten the distance between himself and the next clump of undead. Explosions of blood and viscera kept erupting around him as he madly kept pushing forward, getting completely drenched in the blackish blood.

Only after five minutes did he stumble, coughing out a mouthful of ice-cold blood as his bloodshot eyes looked around with a wild glare. His wound was going haywire from the exertion and the insane amount of Miasma that had entered him by this point.

The System didn't really give him much of an option with this quest, making him once again wonder whether it was giving him extra attention or if it was just an asshole to everyone. The moment he'd started to hesitate whether to back away and not get involved, he'd immediately received a quest that forced him into the fray.

The price for failure wasn't something he could afford. Giving the undead leaders his location and status was likely a death sentence. Not only would the Corpse-lord he'd fought

earlier be warned of his proximity, but his boss would be as well.

Between his festering wound and the disadvantageous terrain, he was in no mood for a second round with the undead nobleman. Zac wasn't even sure he'd survive the encounter, his improved Dao notwithstanding.

Thankfully, while the System seemed intent on throwing him into the thick of it, the rewards were definitely something Zac wanted. Ten Supreme-quality Purification Pills might be exactly what he needed. The pill that he got from Calrin was just some average thing likely considered low quality, yet it had proven quite effective at dealing with his situation.

Ten Supreme-quality pills might not only be enough to cleanse his wound, but also the growing Miasma Core in his body.

Thousands of zombies were quickly whittled down, and Zac could actually sense glee from the spirit in his axe. The growls created by the swings in the air slowly were changing into howls of exultation. An evolved zombie suddenly tried to get the jump on him, trying to flank him as he once again stepped forward to the next pack of the zombies, but a spectral beast suddenly appeared and ripped it into pieces.

This time, the spirit didn't dissipate immediately, though, instead opting to go on a rampage on its own. It was like a bulldozer crushing everything in its path. Zac didn't really understand how it worked, but he didn't mind, as he was on the clock. He hoped that the kills from the Tool Spirit counted toward his own kills at least.

The timer kept decreasing, and soon less than two minutes remained on the quest. Zac only needed a final push now, but he knew he was running out of time. Not the timer, but the amount of deathly energy that had entered him by now.

If he didn't do something quick, he would turn into a zombie himself, even if he kept utilizing his Dao. In a final burst of violence, he once again summoned more blades, this time completely overloading them and turning them into gargantuan blades of death.



With a roar, he unleashed them in five directions, and a prompt told him he'd finished his quest. However, there was no time to take a breather in relief, as his body was racked with an insane amount of pain, absorbing Miasma at an unprecedented rate. Even stopping the killing didn't stop the Miasma from entering his body, as it looked like the huge surge had created its own momentum.

The small whirlpool in his wound from before had created a large physical manifestation as dense clouds of Miasma whirled around him, even following him when he ran away.

An unimaginable amount of corrupted energy kept pushing into Zac's body, filling every nook and cranny before he had a chance to nullify it. His mind was already overtaxed by constantly drawing upon his Dao, and it felt like he was an ant trying to stop an elephant with the Dao of Trees. A numbing cold entered his extremities as even his soul was flooded with corruption. The deathly energy was quickly clouding his sanity, and a blank rage was starting to take control.

Using his remaining clarity, Zac quickly finished the quest, and suddenly held an inscribed bottle with ten golden pills that radiated with such luster that they looked like miniature suns. Zac shakily uncorked the bottle and hurriedly downed a pill, and immediately felt as though the holy flames of life flicked into being in his stomach. He quickly integrated the energy into his Dao spiral in order to directly combat the Miasma trying to seize control.

Unfortunately, it wasn't enough, as there was just too much corruption inside him. The pill did what it was supposed to, but one of them wouldn't cut it against this extraordinary situation. Zac hesitantly looked at the bottle, but he eventually took a steadying breath before swallowing another two of the golden beads. His hesitation wasn't without reason, as he remembered what the Sky Gnome had told him.

Swallowing Purification Pills was like swallowing fire that burned away the corruption. One normal pill was already taxing on the body. Taking two was putting your life on the line. Three was tantamount to suicide, and there was no telling what would happen with these far superior pills. Yet Zac felt

he had no option, and was reduced to praying that the two rampaging powers would cancel each other out.

The gambit seemed somewhat effective, allowing Zac to take a quick breather. But the torrential amount of Miasma entering him was almost endless. Zac's eyes suddenly widened in horror as he saw that even the zombies still standing in the horde around him started to lifelessly fall to the ground as the Miasma was ripped out of their bodies to join the ever-growing whirlpool.

The effect was quickly rippling outward through the horde, and in just seconds, even more zombies had died from loss of Miasma than Zac's assault, with hundreds falling down with every breath.

Whatever the Corpse-lord had planted inside him was completely unleashed and was creating a growing storm in the area. Not even the evolved zombies were safe as the whirlpool greedily sucked out their corruption, instantly killing them.

A small solace was that the tens of thousands of zombies that were getting killed was counted as his kills, also awarding him with Cosmic Energy. However, Zac wasn't happy with the huge sudden increase of experience, as his defenses were quickly crumbling against the increased power of deathly energy.

Completely ignoring the consequences of over-imbibing medicine, Zac quickly downed another handful of pills, leaving only one in the bottle for emergencies. The Miasma whirlwind around him kept expanding, and without any alternatives, he desperately fled toward an area with sparser amounts of Miasma.

Even with nine supreme-quality pills in his body, creating a Dao-empowered blazing inferno of purification, it was barely enough to keep his sanity in check, and Zac's mind was a blur as he started running towards the woods. Worse yet, it no longer only was a problem of being flooded with Miasma, but his body was also burning from the inside from the radiant energy of the pills.

The two powers almost seemed to be in contention of who could destroy his body first, as they rampaged through every part of his body, causing unimaginable pain.

However, Zac knew that if he relented, the Miasma would win, as the supply was almost endless in the Dead Zone. With no alternative, he swallowed his final pill as he kept running, finally emerging from the core of the vast zombie horde.

By now, a huge chunk of the horde was simply lying lifeless on the ground while Zac's figure was completely shrouded in Miasma almost dense enough to liquefy. The whirlpool above him even started to look like a hurricane with him as the eye. It made Zac look like a specter that was fleeing for the woods, surrounded by uncountable turquoise will-o'-the-wisps.

“Wait! Let us help!” A voice from the distance entered Zac's ears through the chaos, but he was barely coherent at this point and ignored the call.

Through the haze of the Miasma around him, he finally spotted a line of trees, and he mindlessly ran toward it, his only goal to get away from this godforsaken paddy and its zombies. His desperation lent strength to his legs, and with great strides, he disappeared amongst the trees, leaving a shell-shocked resistance army.

The zombie hunters and resistance fighters mutely overlooked the scene of carnage and desolation, unable to move for a few seconds. The scene of destruction they'd just witnessed was something they'd never forget.

Only one pair of eyes hesitantly looked in the direction of the ocean of Miasma receding between the trees, and the man inside it.



## CHANGES

The clashes kept going for god knows how long between the two whirlpools in Zac's body, and the energy contained in the center between them was growing more and more horrifying. Zac knew if something destabilized whatever was going on within the blazing waves of energy, he'd explode like a nuclear bomb.

The tenth pill had thankfully been enough for him to regain some sort of equilibrium between the two opposing forces, and he wholeheartedly focused his energy on keeping the energy fluctuations as stable as he could.

He was fresh out of ideas and options, but he refused to give in. Giving up control at this moment was tantamount to dying, so he kept overtaxing his mind and kept pushing his Dao past its limits. He had no idea where he was going or how long he ran, but finally, his legs gave out, and he didn't have the energy to get up again.

Still, he kept fighting against the inevitable, hoping that something would change. His will had transformed over the past months, and even though the pain he was feeling far eclipsed what he'd gone through in the pool of Cosmic Water, he never thought to end it.

Instead, he stoutly endured the raging battle between life and death in his body, his mind focusing on his goals and ambitions. For cycle after cycle, the two whirlpools clashed, and Zac forgot everything except those two forces' ebb and flow.

A prompt flashed in his periphery as he kept struggling, but his mind was too overtaxed to notice it. He only kept focusing on stabilizing the two opposing forces and stabilizing his wound. Finally, the frantic bursts from the miasmic wound gave in just as Zac's Dao swirl was on the verge of completely dissipating.

Zac thought he could sense a wave of reluctance and hatred before it disappeared and stillness settled in his body.

The clashes abruptly stopped, and relief flooded Zac's mind. But it also was the last straw as his mind quickly started to descend into darkness. He had kept himself conscious through sheer willpower, resisting long past his limits. But just before his mind submerged into a deep slumber, he sensed something change in the Miasma Core. Before, it had been shrouded in a haze, but Zac could suddenly sense something.

A small seed barely as large as a fingernail, but containing enough energy to blow up a city, was quietly nestled in his body.

---

Sharp pain in his leg woke Zac up from his slumber with a groan. He looked around with bleary eyes, which widened at the sight of a desiccated zombie dumbly gnawing at his ankle. Luckily, his gear and attributes kept him safe, as the bites only left some surface wounds.

Zac quickly slapped the head of the undead, instantly destroying its brain. However, the rapid motion caused a bout of vertigo, and Zac emptied his stomach without warning. Finally, after a few dry heaves, he managed to sit up and look around with a squint, his head still aching from overusing his mental energy.

He was in some random forest, with nothing around as far as he could see apart from dead or dying trees. In his muddled state, it took some time for him to realize something was odd; he wasn't hurting. That, of course, wasn't completely correct, as every part of him hurt. It was odd in the sense that the

wound in his side that had plagued him for what felt like forever was completely inert, not even a twang remaining.

The only pain he felt at the moment was a general ache all over his body accompanied by a splitting headache from overdrafting his Dao and most likely his soul. The great change prompted him to quickly close his eyes again and focus on his side.

He was amazed to sense that there barely was any Miasma in his wound, and it was almost completely inert. It still absorbed a small amount of Miasma, but it could barely be called a trickle. And that was with his Dao not currently rotating. It likely wasn't much worse than what anyone traversing the Dead Zone experienced.

He even took off his shirt again to visually inspect the wound, and he was able to note that the blackness of the wound and tendrils were quite faded. The skin they covered also wasn't cold like a corpse's like before, but had regained its warmth.

It was a relief, but Zac frowned as he remembered the sense of extreme power in that little ball that had been created from the clashes between his pill-empowered Dao whirl and the Miasma in his wound. It was still nestled right below his navel, but it had now somehow integrated itself with his pathways.

The little bead seemed completely inert, as though the monstrous amounts of power it contained were locked away. It looked completely different compared to the Miasma Cores he had seen until now, no matter if you talked composition or energy density. Besides, if it was a fully formed Miasma Core, he would have been a braindead zombie by now.

But if not a Miasma Core, then what?

It was only after long hesitation Zac dared to channel some Cosmic Energy through the paths. It was with a huge sigh of relief he felt that the energy passed the bead by without it even reacting.

If the bead started making a ruckus from energy going through, he would essentially be crippled, as the bead was nestled in a core position of the pathways. What made him confused, though, was that its position reminded him of what he'd learned about the cores of D-grade powerhouses.

They were often located in the very same position he found the bead, making it almost seem that he'd formed a Cosmic Core. However, there were some differences from what he'd heard about the topic. A real core was supposedly larger, and while the power contained in his bead was high, it was nothing compared to a real core.

A real Cosmic Core was the source of energy for a D-grade Hegemon. He still didn't really understand what that entailed, but from what Ogras said, it wasn't only a matter of quantity, but also of quality. The energy of a genuine core was of a higher grade than anything he could come in contact with, whereas his core was something else entirely.

There was also the issue of how it was formed. His core had been created from Miasma, Supreme-grade Purification Pills, and his Dao, making its composition completely different from what it should contain. He didn't even understand how the core could form, as the two energies that it was made from should be each other's bane.

Zac guessed he would have to slowly try to understand what was going on, as he simply had far too little information to make any educated guesses at the moment. He would have to ask someone whether it was possible to form a core embryo before reaching D-grade or something of the sort. For now he had to focus on what he could do and instead opened his status screen.

**Name: Zachary Atwood**

**Level: 58**

**Class: [F-Rare] Hatchetman**

**Race: [E] Human**

**Alignment: [Earth] Port Atwood - Lord**



**Titles: Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Core**

**Dao: Seed of Heaviness – Middle, Seed of Trees – High, Seed of Sharpness – Early**

**Strength: 320**

**Dexterity: 158**

**Endurance: 227**

**Vitality: 188**

**Intelligence: 90**

**Wisdom: 85**

**Luck: 93**

**Free Points: 6**

**Nexus Coins: 49,903,653**

Zac's brows rose when he saw the number of Nexus Coins he somehow possessed. He'd gained around twenty million Nexus Coins since he'd checked last. He knew he'd gained around seventy to a hundred Nexus Coins from the zombies, so killing ten thousand of them for his quest should account for less than a tenth of the total number. His memory contained some blanks from his desperate instinctual flight earlier. Just what had happened?

That wasn't the only thing. His level had increased by two. He was somewhat close to leveling to 57 before running into the zombie horde, but still he'd gained a whole level on top of that, which was quite a lot seeing as how arduous it was becoming to reach new levels.

He also sensed that it wouldn't take much effort to gain another level, bringing him just one step away from level 60. A quick glance at his watch reassured him at least that only

one day had passed, making his current leveling speed the highest he'd ever managed. He wondered what humanity had thought when they saw him push past two levels in no time.

His stats had improved once again almost across the board, and he quickly noted a large reason for this. His Seed of Trees had finally reached High level, bringing it just one step from the peak. His speed of improvement was almost unfathomable, and it made Zac realize why most people ventured out adventuring rather than sitting at home meditating when they were stuck at a bottleneck.

He never would have improved his Dao of Trees to the middle grade if it wasn't for the battle with the Corpse Lord, and his current breakthrough could be directly attributed to his experiences while moving through the Dead Zone. He quickly opened up his Dao screen and took a look at his evolved seed.

**[Trees (High): Endurance +10, Vitality +40, Intelligence +5, Wisdom +5]**

The seed now gave a whopping 60 attribute points, doubling up from before. Zac got a bit excited, even though he knew it would happen. Comparing from how it was before his new insight gave him +15 Vitality, and 5 points in Endurance, Intelligence, and Wisdom each.

His insight was based on the dynamic nature of the life of a tree, how it went from almost a death-like state during winter back to teeming with life during summer. It was everchanging, and it was only through death that life could come. Even if a forest burned down, the ashes became nourishment for the seeds germinating in the ground.

Zac felt that this concept was applicable to many things, but for the moment, he had no time to properly sit down and ponder on it. He had too many things to do, and he didn't even know where he was, or what to do about the miniature bomb lodged in his body uncomfortably close to his family jewels.

There was, however, one more change in his screen that might give him a hint of what was going on. He saw that there was a new title in his growing list of accomplishments. With

anticipation, he focused on the new title called Core, but what he saw only made him more confused.

**[Core: Successfully form a Core. Reward: ??????]**

Zac blankly stared at the odd line for a while until he hesitantly closed it with a frown. After mentally going through it in his mind, there simply was no reward from the title, differing from all other ones. If he didn't know any better, he would have guessed there was a bug in a computer system.

But the menus and prompts weren't part of some random program; they were part of THE System, an entity powerful enough to conquer multiple dimensions.

He was completely confused as to what the weird line meant, and he wasn't even sure whether it was something he should ask around about. The thing with bugs was that they tended to get corrected, and he wasn't sure how the System dealt with people who did things they weren't supposed to.

Zac had a feeling the weird prompt was the result of a series of coincidental circumstances. The combination of his specific Dao and whatever the Corpse Lord had injected him with had transformed and created something odd through the circumstances of being triggered by the purifier.

Next was the insane amount of Miasma that had entered him in a very short span of time. Normally, he shouldn't have survived something like that. It was the same with the pills. Taking two of those terrifying top-tier Purification Pills would burn most people alive. But he'd gobbled down ten at the same time and still lived to tell the tale.

The only reason he could think of as to why he was still alive was his experience in the pond of Cosmic Water. The experience had been a bit similar, though it wasn't exactly the same. His body had absorbed extreme amounts of energy from the Fruit of Ascension along with the Cosmic Water and had been ripped apart and re-formed untold times.

Perhaps that very experience had changed something with him on a fundamental level and allowed him to survive when he by all accounts should have exploded or become an undead.

However, he didn't have time to figure anything out or even get dressed because an eerie laugh dragged him out of his thoughts.

“Well, what's this?” A hollow voice drifted out from behind him, prompting Zac to whirl around and whip out his axe.



## GHOSTS

Zac's eyes widened as he saw what faced him. The best way to describe it was that he was looking at a ghost. It was clearly an undead denizen teeming with Miasma, but it was mostly translucent. It didn't really have any facial features apart from its eyes shining in white and aquamarine.

It looked upon Zac like it was gazing at an oddity, apparently not even considering the possibility of having found itself in danger.

"You've strayed quite some ways from safety, human," the specter said. "I will let you live if you can provide any hints to what caused the miasmatic disturbance in this area."

Zac blankly stared at the apparition for a second, not sure what to do. While the thing talked the talk, his intuition told him that the undead in front of him was not of the same power as the Corpselord he'd fought earlier. For a second, he thought it might be another of the generals, but he quickly discounted that possibility. The air around it wasn't even slightly distorted from power, and his danger sense didn't flare up.

Unhappy with the lack of response, the undead looked ready to follow up with something else, but a glance at the wound on Zac's side stopped the wraith in its tracks.

"What *is* that on your body?"

Zac's mind worked a mile a minute as he quickly put on his robe again. It looked like his experience had caused a huge disturbance in the area, causing even the sentient undead to

scout it out. Perhaps it wasn't even alone, with some of the real leaders close by.

He was still not yet ready to start an all-out brawl with the undead forces. His wound was finally better, but he still hadn't explored the changes to his body. He didn't want to overload the odd core in him and go off like fireworks from destabilizing it. The core contained enough Miasma to create over a hundred thousand zombies; who knew what could happen if it was unleashed.

“Oh, you are one of Lord Mhal's experiments...” the wraith said, but it shuddered as it looked at Zac's body, seemingly seeing straight through him. “But what is that core... Wait, that axe... You're—”

The undead didn't get further than that, though, as Zac flashed right next to it with **[Loamwalker]** with his axe already mid-swing. With a growl, the edge went straight through the head of the wraith with a swoosh, but Zac didn't feel any elation.

His brows furrowed when he saw that the undead was completely fine, and Zac understood why the undead was so laidback. The thing was completely incorporeal, and a normal attack wouldn't cut it. Without missing a beat, he imbued the edge with the Dao of Heaviness and swung once again before the ghost even had time to react to the first swing.

He hoped that the effect would be like when he'd fought the ghost wolves during the first wave. His normal hits hadn't worked, but when he'd empowered the strike with the Dao, he had no problem killing them. However, the empowered swing didn't fare any better, harmlessly passing through the undead.

Zac already knew that some undead were notoriously hard to kill, often requiring specific classes or skills to get the job done. Unfortunately, he had no skill of that kind. Initially, he'd hoped that his repository would contain one, but there were only so many skills in there.

“To think you left your island to come here. Great Lord Voshri was very intrigued when you defeated Mhal.” The wraith laughed as it started to flutter away through the woods.

“I am guessing you’re the cause for the disturbance as well. The benefits you will bring me.”

Zac knew he couldn’t let this thing get away, as it would cause untold trouble. Not only did it immediately figure out who he was, but it also seemed to possess some sort of ocular skill. It had clearly managed to see the core inside his body. Even worse, Zac’s brows rose in alarm as the ghost started to shine with a stronger and stronger turquoise light, beginning to look like an unholy beacon.

Out of options, Zac only had one idea. He’d used the Dao of Trees to combat the Miasma for a week now, and perhaps it would be effective in combat as well. The problem was that he never had been able to push the Dao of Trees into his axe, forcing him to only use it for defense.

Zac once again used his movement skill to get next to the fleeing specter and, ignoring his tired mind, unleashed a large Dao Field around him. This time, he didn’t create a whirl, but just expanded a sphere of influence that focused on the ghost.

The Dao Field quickly drifted out, covering a diameter of over twenty meters around him, a huge difference compared to the Dao Field he could create with his Dao of Heaviness. Clearly, the field was effective, as the wraith faltered as it tried to fly away, and even its light dimmed noticeably.

Zac was immediately upon the undead again, once again swinging his axe. He was ready to try to force the Dao of Trees inside the weapon, but it was surprisingly effortless to integrate the Dao into his axe as it once again ripped toward the head of the wraith.

This time, the specter tried dodging, but it was to no avail as it was bogged down by the high-grade Dao Field. Desperate, its eyes lit up like two ghostly lanterns, and a shield from Miasma was erected in front of it. However, it was clear that it was just some sort of scout, its defense largely relying on being incorporeal. Its actual prowess was nowhere close to Zac’s.

The shield couldn’t even muster a defense against **[Verun’s Bite]**, which was teeming with green energy. The



ghost didn't get decapitated but rather destroyed as the axe blasted through, shining with its green glimmer.

The green light was the Dao of Trees, and it almost looked like it was extremely potent acid as it started to eat the specter, who shrieked as it tried to get it off. However, in just seconds, most of the undead was gone, leaving only a husk.

"From death comes life..." Zac muttered as he looked at the ghost melting away in no time.

It looked like he had gotten himself an amazing weapon against the undead. It was extremely effective on the ghost, and Zac guessed that it would work wonders against the other undead as well. Ogras had mentioned that some of the elites among the undead were extremely hard to kill, but it looked he had gained himself an ace against these things.

However, he couldn't relax just yet, as the Miasma around the perishing ghost suddenly shuddered. Zac quickly backed away, just in time to avoid an aquamarine ball of fire shooting up at the sky, quickly consuming the last of the undead. It appeared that the thing had ignited its last energy to either take him with it into true death, or give out its location.

Zac was far more worried about the second option, as it would mean the ghost wasn't alone. He had a strong feeling that the ruckus he'd caused yesterday wasn't small, and this thing was likely only one of many. Not wasting any time, he immediately set out to the east, planning to get back on track.

However, he only ran for a few minutes before he was dismayed to find himself essentially surrounded by undead. No matter which direction he looked, he could spot a ghost scout. Since it was just a matter of time before he was found out, he simply decided to make a break for it and pushed his speed to the limit as he ran through the woods.

As he suspected, a few bright beams exploded in the sky not long after, likely markers released by scouts. Zac's location was completely exposed, and he suddenly felt like prey surrounded by an endless number of hunting dogs. Zac ignored the ghosts and kept pushing forward, aiming to get as far away as possible from the core zone.

Before he blacked out yesterday, he'd already been quite close to the center of the undead incursion, and judging from the density of Miasma in the area, he'd gone further inside during his mad dash. He couldn't be held up here, since stronger and stronger reinforcements would come if he was bogged down.

He felt like a trapped animal as he ran through the gloomy forest with his eyes darting left and right, waiting for anything to pop out between the trees. He was proven right in almost no time, as he suddenly found himself in a clearing with over a thousand undead in waiting.

He wanted to slap himself when he realized he'd been tricked. Finding himself facing a waiting army was no accident. The ghosts shining their lights around him were herding him. He'd subconsciously tried to run in the direction where there were fewer lights in the way, steering clear of the directions thick with ghosts, afraid the enemy would be there.

Worse yet, this undead army was something else entirely compared to the native zombies, as they all looked sentient and well equipped. And in the front of the army stood a familiar figure, and seeing him, Zac couldn't help a groan escaping.

"It's you after all! No wonder my wounds were aching!" the Corpselord roared with fury as Miasma in the area started to gather around him.

The undead general was clearly back on his feet, looking intact, though Zac was surprised to see that the arm he'd crushed with **[Nature's Punishment]** looked completely different from before. It was to the point that Zac suspected that it had actually been replaced with another arm somehow, as it not only was larger compared to his other arm, it even looked to belong to some other type of humanoid.

However, the Corpselord didn't feel weaker compared to before. On the contrary, it felt like he'd even gained a power-up, and the new arm pulsed with power. Perhaps the arm had once belonged to an E-grade individual, as the power

emanations reminded him of those of the Fiend Wolf and hive queen.

The Corpse-lord was backed up by quite a few other undead, but Zac felt that there were no other combatants at the same level as the leader itself, which was the only good news so far. Hopefully, he was the only general that had come to the area to check things out, or at least the others were some distance away.

Time was of the essence, so Zac wordlessly sent out five large fractal edges toward the army, imbuing them with the Dao of Heaviness. However, the Corpse-lord only snorted as a vast aura of power emanated from him.

“Shields!” the general roared, prompting huge turquoise barriers wrought from Miasma to be erected.

As for himself, the unliving general simply jumped forward and punched the fractal heading in his direction. The collision created a huge impact, creating a small crater in the ground, but it was clear which force was stronger. The new larger arm of the Corpse-lord didn't even get a scratch as the fractal dissipated into a few wild swirls of Cosmic Energy.

“Your tricks will not work again, human. I do not know how you survived the divine seeds, but I will slowly figure it out as I pick you apart,” the Corpse-lord said with a growl, its eyes still blazing with fury.

Zac was starting to suspect that the reaction of the general, who apparently was named Mhal, was due to more than just having lost the battle two weeks ago. The undead looked like he wanted to eat him whole. Perhaps the punishment for failing the mission was quite extreme.

Since the incursions had long stabilized, they should have an open channel of communications with the main forces back on their own worlds. Who knew, perhaps the Corpse-lord's whole faction was implicated due to the failure. From how Ogras explained how things worked in the Multiverse, it seemed like a distinct possibility.

Zac knew that even if some other powerhouses were close, they would be attracted by a large battle. He would need to finish this up quickly and then flee at top speed, so he decided on a gambit. The undead army wasn't just waiting on him, though, and a flurry of attacks flew his way as their leader simply was content to observe for the moment.

Cosmic Energy gathered at the fractal on Zac's arm with extreme speed as he ran to keep a constant distance from the opposing side. Soon the fractal was filled, and he pushed forward with his arm once again, making reality crack.

The huge arm from the other dimension started reaching for the Corpse Lord, who didn't seem surprised at its appearance. In fact, he seemed gleeful, fully expecting the attack.

"Did you think the same attack would work twice?" the undead sneered as torrential amounts of corruption rose from three huge kettles carried by gigantic Corpse Golems.



## RAVENOUS

“I’m not limited by the Ruthless Heavens here. This time, I have my legion with me!” the Corpselord roared as three huge streams of corruption rose out of the kettles and flew to intercept the emerging hand above Zac.

Zac wasn’t surprised the undead leader had something up his sleeve, but he didn’t change his mind. He pushed the gigantic hand forward, making it slam straight into the torrents of corruption as it moved to crush the undead general.

A sizzling could be heard from his arm as smoke started to rise, making Zac grunt in pain. But he kept going, and soon the whole arm was submerged in the putrid liquid from the kettles. It was a far stronger version of the corruption that had spewed out of the Corpselord’s own body during the last fight, and Zac felt as though he were submerged in a vat of acid.

“True Rot!” the undead leader roared as he pushed the Miasma in the air to join the liquid from the kettles, pushing the decaying powers to another level.

The hand was completely submerged in a blob of turbid liquid as it stopped some distance from the undead lord, who looked at a panting Zac with a sneer. The effect of the ball of corruption was extended to Zac as well, and the effect was strong enough to singe him all over. The hair and beard he’d grown out fell out in thick clumps, and the cloak he used above his real gear was rotting away at a speed visible to the naked eye.

However, the Corpse-lord's eyes suddenly opened wide in alarm as an emerald shockwave of energy scattered the blob of corruption. The putrid liquid flew in all directions, actually killing dozens of the undead soldiers, as a hand blazing in green luster emerged out of it.

The arm wrought out of nature didn't look decayed at all. On the contrary, it seemed even more vibrant compared to before, as small saplings and leaves grew from its rugged exterior.

"You!" Mhal roared as he tried to perform a body swap, but it was to no avail.

The hand had somehow locked down space around it, turning the area into its domain. Zac sensed it was something like a Dao Field in a sense, but at the same time, it was far sturdier. Aghast, the Corpse-lord tried to flee, but he didn't get far as the hand quickly closed around him.

"I'll take you with me! Detonate!" was the last thing the undead screamed in fury as the hand clenched, causing a sickening crunch.

Zac froze for a second, bracing for whatever his foe had planned in revenge. But nothing happened, making Zac look around in confusion. The Corpse-lord had tried to detonate something, and the most likely target was the thing embedded in Zac's gut. But perhaps the odd changes it had undergone had broken the connection Mhal possessed.

Zac sighed in relief as he saw his gambit was successful. He was betting that the two upgrades to his Dao of Trees would supersede whatever the Corpse-lord had planned. A Dao Seed gaining two upgrades was a huge boost, and even with the support of the Dead Zone, Mhal shouldn't have been ready for the power-up.

He was correct. Though the three large kettles made the power of rot far stronger, it was no match for the concept of growth through decay. The hand had even emerged stronger from the attack. A huge surge of Cosmic Energy entered him, effortlessly pushing him to level 59.

While there was utter chaos in the undead ranks from the sudden fall of their leader, Zac quickly ran forward and stored the mangled remains and weapon of the Corpse Lord in his sack. The undead himself possessed a sack, which Zac quickly bound to himself and put inside his robe.

Zac had achieved his goal and was pondering what to do next. He even contemplated going on a rampage to push himself toward level 60. However, a sudden blaze of pain erupted in his body as the core beneath his navel sprang to life as it started to absorb Miasma once again.

The last words of the Corpse Lord once again echoed in Zac's mind, making him wonder whether Mhal had some sort of contingency after all.

At least, Zac noted with some relief, the Miasma it absorbed wasn't too bad, not at all at the same level as before. Of course, continuously absorbing corrupted energy wasn't great, so Zac quickly started up a Dao swirl above the bead to stem the influx, even though his mental energy was quite tapped out.

However, his eyes widened in horror when he felt the mental energy forming the Dao swirl getting sucked into the bead alongside the Miasma. Zac quickly stopped the Dao swirl, afraid he would damage his mind if it kept going. He was already almost wrung dry from yesterday, and along with this fight, he was already close to his limits.

Right now was not the time to ponder on a response to the new issue because the undead army was quickly turning berserk after seeing their leader get killed. Huge lumbering Corpse Golems were rushing toward him as a dizzying array of attacks soared through the air.

Zac judged the army to be even stronger than his demon force, with real foreign invaders making up the bulk. Even at top condition, this wasn't a fight he'd take on heedlessly. He quickly oriented himself as he dodged as many of the attacks as he could before he started to run around the army. It was time to flee.



A few of the golems moved to intercept, and Zac once again hefted his axe as he carved a path of carnage to make an escape. However, the undead here were not like the mindless zombies from before, and they mounted a terrifying retaliation. He was constantly struck by fists almost as large as himself, and each one hit with the force of a truck.

He was also continuously pelted by ranged attacks, both mental and physical. His skill [**Mental Fortress**] was running on overdrive, and he was forced to unsummon the glistening leaves from [**Nature's Barrier**], as he was unable to keep up the consumption of Cosmic Energy from re-forming them.

In just a few minutes, he was completely bloodied with innumerable wounds. However, the undead army wasn't unscathed either. With each step of Zac's, an elite of the undead army was destroyed as he pushed forward like a meat grinder on legs.

It didn't matter whether it was Corpse Golems, aberrations, or elite zombies. Everything fell in front of Zac's relentless swings. The experience he was gaining was enormous, but he knew he couldn't keep it up for long. With every kill, he gained Cosmic Energy, but more Miasma also entered him.

If that was it, then it wouldn't be such a problem, but the core clearly was looking for some sort of equilibrium as it kept absorbing opposing energy as well. Since Zac couldn't keep the Dao Field going anymore, it actually absorbed something else from him. His life force.

It felt like he was slowly being sucked dry, and every time he killed an undead, a little bit of his life was ripped away to keep the balance going. However, it wasn't like he could just stop, so the carnage continued until he finally broke away from the army, fleeing into the woods.

This time, he wouldn't get controlled by any ghosts, and he pushed straight east. A quick look around showed that the army at least wasn't following him. He'd caused massive losses to the army, and perhaps they didn't want to throw their lives away, instead opting to wait for orders from superiors.

A few of the scouts tried to keep track of him, but Zac finally managed to shake them off with the help of **[Loamwalker]** and his superior physique. However, he was completely spent by this point. The fight had cost him almost all his Cosmic Energy, and his mind was overtaxed after the last two days' efforts.

Even his body felt completely drained from the bead sucking the life out of him. At least it had calmed down a bit since he'd stopped his killing spree, but things still looked dire. Even though he just wanted to lie down and sleep for a few days, he kept running.

He'd just killed one of the generals of the undead army, and he didn't for one second think that there wouldn't be some reaction to this. He needed to create much more distance before he was satisfied. He really wanted to find a road by this point, but the forests and uneven plains felt endless as he ran for hours.

Zac's mind was starting to become a blur, all his effort focused on taking one step after another. He'd long lost any pursuers trying to keep up with him, but the problem of him getting continuously drained was persisting. No matter what he tried, from using his Dao to trying to feed the bead the energy from Nexus Crystals, it didn't work.

The only thing he found to somewhat help out was to eat meat from strong creatures, so he kept continuously eating dried meat as he ran. In just a few hours, he'd consumed a couple of weeks' worth of food, but he kept ravenously putting one piece after another into his mouth as he ran.

The only permanent solution Zac could come up with at the moment was to keep running further away from the core of the Dead Zone. The drain on his body was based on how much Miasma his body absorbed from the atmosphere. Zac figured that if he got to the edge of the Dead Zone, the sparse Miasma in the air would result in his body not being drained to such a degree.

Still, even with his speed, he knew it might take days to get far enough out, as he felt he was getting closer and closer

to his limits, meat or no meat. Those were the thoughts churning in Zac's muddled head as a bright light suddenly flashed from the left of him, and he looked over with confused eyes. What entered his eyes was a large truck speeding right toward him, and in the next moment, everything went black.

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Zac was swimming in a sea of darkness, not knowing what was going on. He couldn't remember how he got here, or even who he was. Time and space had no meaning as he quietly floated in the endless black until a glowing warmth spread through the universe, rekindling his memories.

Zac stirred with a groan and immediately heard a conversation above him.

“Why are you wasting our resources on that man? He is teeming with Miasma; he's probably lived inside the Dead Zone for months. I don't know how he has survived, he doesn't seem to have an ounce of Cosmic Energy in his body, and he seems like he's on the verge of death anyway,” a disgruntled voice said as Zac felt something pushing him in his side. “Just let him quietly pass.”

“It was us who hit him with our truck, it's only right that we help him out. And how I use my healing powers is none of your business,” an irritated female voice from somewhere right next to Zac responded. “Besides, do you want to answer to the battle monks when they find out we left one of their kind in the wilderness?”

“Shit, we've already lost most of our army, but you pick up strays. Well, whatever,” the man muttered, followed by steps walking away.

The warmth kept flooding into his body, reinvigorating his drained cells. At the same time, he felt that some Miasma kept entering his body, though now the golden warmth was what got absorbed into his core to balance it out. It gave his body a much-needed respite, as he was just too exhausted from the past two days.

He wanted to get up and see what was going on, but he was surprised that his body wasn't listening to him, not even allowing him to open his eyes. Instead, he was forced to lie there mulling over what the two said. The way the man had described him was troubling, so he tried to properly sense the state of his body.

He was shocked by what he found out. He had no problem using his inner vision, but he almost thought he was looking at someone else when he saw what was going on.

There was not a smidgeon of energy in his body, to the point that it almost felt like he'd gone back to being a normal mortal. At the same time, his frame had undergone a transformation, and not a good one. Most of his muscles were gone, and he looked sickly or starving. Zac guessed that his bulk had been swallowed along with his energy into the gluttonous bead.

Finally, there was the mention of battle monks. Zac didn't understand what they had to do with him until he went over the battle from before. The fight had once again singed his hair clean, he realized with an inward groan.

*I guess I'm back to being Monk*, was the last helpless thought in Zac's mind as he once again drifted into unconsciousness.



## MONKS

Zac once again woke up from his deep slumber. This time, he was relieved to sense that he was once again able to move, though the feeling of feebleness was still there. He arduously got up to a sitting position and quickly looked around.

He was in the cargo area of a small military truck that was obviously still driving, as it was bumping and waving around. Inside were another six people resting, four men and two women. All of them were east Asian apart from one of the men, who seemed to be Indian.

Two were having a conversation with subdued voices, while the others were reading or maintaining their weapons. When Zac got up to a sitting position, a few glanced at him, but soon lost interest and got back to what they were doing.

Zac still wasn't sure what was going on, so he first checked his situation. He wasn't bound or anything of the sort, and he still had all his Cosmos Sacks within his robes. It appeared he wasn't a prisoner, not that he really thought that after overhearing the earlier conversation.

Still, it was a relief since he wasn't sure he'd be able to mount a prison break in his current condition. A deep rumbling in his stomach reminded him of his wretched and starved state, and it also roused one of the girls who sat close to him.

"You're awake? How are you feeling?" she asked after she noticed Zac's sitting posture, and Zac could tell that she was the one who spoke earlier before he passed out again.

She was quite short, barely reaching 150 cm. Along with her petite frame, Zac almost thought for a second that she was a child. However, she appeared to be somewhere in her early twenties from her facial features. She didn't give off a strong impression from her appearance, but there was still something about her.

At first, he couldn't put his finger on it, but after a while, Zac realized it was a slight aura of power. However, it was different from those he was used to, like his own or the demon warriors'. Their auras were drenched in bloodlust and something wrought from countless battles.

Hers was a subdued warm glow that gave off a rather comforting feeling. Another rumble came from Zac's belly, and with a slight flush, the girl quickly handed over a can of sausages from her backpack.

"Yes, thank you for saving me," Zac answered with a hoarse voice and quickly devoured the small Vienna sausages with relish.

He considered bringing out something more from his pouch but decided against it with some regret. He wasn't in a condition to defend himself for the moment, and showing he possessed multiple Cosmos Sacks wasn't a good idea.

"We're sorry about hitting you with our truck. I'm Sui. We're heading out of the Dead Zone now, and you're free to join us."

"Oh?" Zac said. "In which direction?"

"We're—" Sui said, but didn't get further before a gruff voice interrupted her.

"Oh? You're awake? Which monastery do you belong to?"

Zac frowned and looked over at a man who sat opposite him. The voice was the same one that wanted to leave him for dead earlier.

"I am not part of any monastery," Zac answered, deciding to tell the truth.

He felt there was no point in lying about the situation, as he had no idea what the so-called battle monks were. He'd be exposed in just a follow-up question or two, and he didn't want to get caught lying while he was in this condition.

Though he could sit up, his body was far from restored, and he wasn't sure he would even be able to walk around at the moment.

"You've got some balls impersonating a monk," the man snorted. "I say we throw him off before we arrive. We can't afford to anger the Everlasting Monastery. Our villages depend on their protection."

"Don't be stupid. The monks are benevolent people. They wouldn't jeopardize the population over something like that," Sui said with a glare.

"What's the Everlasting Monastery?" Zac asked.

"It's a large monastery led by one of the most powerful people in the world, Abbot Everlasting Peace. The monastery is actually two days inside the Dead Zone, but the monks still reside there. More impressively, they are actually able to purify the Miasma," Sui said with some reverence on her face. "They have turned a large area into a safe zone."

Zac's brows rose at the explanation. Abbot Everlasting Peace was actually the one he was most curious about since the Ladder System was launched, even more so than Salvation and Thea Marshall. Abbot Everlasting Peace was the person who had held the first spot on the Dao Ladder at the time.

Surprisingly, there had been no information about him, or the Indian guru holding the second spot on the Dao Ladder, in New Washington. So it turned out the monk was staying in the middle of the undead incursion, somehow eking out a living.

Zac felt it was no wonder that the abbot had such a high level. He was living in the middle of an incursion, so he was bound to either perish or get strong, just like himself. A thought struck Zac, and he opened up the Ladders for the first time in a while.



## **Ladder – Level**

**Rank | Name | Level**

- 1. Super Brother-Man: 59**
- 2. Salvation: 48**
- 3. Thea Marshall: 47**
- 4. Enigma: 43**
- 5. Thwonkin' Billy: 42**
- 6. Joker: 42**
- 7. Abbot Everlasting Peace: 41**
- 8. Daoist Chosui: 41**
- 9. Silverfox: 41**
- 10. Guru Anaad Phakiwar: 40**

...

- 100. Ling Tian: 40**

## **Ladder – Wealth**

**Rank | Name**

- 1. Super Brother-Man**
- 2. Smaug**
- 3. Salvation**
- 4. Joker**
- 5. Enigma**
- 6. Greed**
- 7. Little Treasure**
- 8. Thwonkin' Billy**
- 9. The Eternal Eye**
- 10. Henry Marshall**

## **Ladder – Dao**

**Rank | Name**

- 1. Abbot Everlasting Peace**
- 2. Guru Anaad Phakiwar**
- 3. Super Brother-Man**
- 4. Thea Marshall**
- 5. Abbot Boundless Truth**
- 6. The Eternal Eye**
- 7. Silverfox**
- 8. Father Thomas**
- 9. Daoist Chosui**
- 10. Little Treasure**

Zac was shocked. Not even attaining a high-tiered seed was enough to push him to the top of the Dao Ladder. It made him truly wonder just what kind of insights the monk had. He was actually a bit excited about going to the monastery now. Perhaps he would be able to glean some insight as to why the monk was gaining so much enlightenment.

Otherwise, not much was changing on the Ladders. The only large change since he checked last was that the individual named Dahlia had disappeared from the Ladder. Before, she was at the ninth spot, so Zac guessed she'd died. It happened every now and then, and it seemed that less than thirty of the original Rankers were left on the Ladder after roughly eleven weeks.

Some had simply gotten passed by others, while others died. To keep up with the top 100 of the world, one needed to be constantly throwing oneself in danger, after all. Another trend Zac noticed was that the Ladders were starting to get more harmonized.

At the start, Zac was one of the few who existed on all Ladders, while Thea was another example. But by now, quite a few of those who were on the Dao Ladder also found themselves on the Level Ladder. This was nothing odd, as gaining a Dao Seed not only improved attributes, but also

empowered skills. It gave a huge boost and would increase leveling speed and survivability by a tier.

Zac himself would be long dead if he didn't have his Dao Seeds, for example. Curiously enough, Salvation still wasn't on the Dao Ladder, defying expectations. There was a rumor in New Washington that Salvation was doing the same as the Dominators, gaining levels by killing humans, which was why he gained so many levels without gaining any Dao.

"Why are you heading to the monastery?" Zac suddenly asked.

"There was an... incident," Sui hesitantly answered, throwing a quick glance at Zac.

"Incident? You call most of our people getting slaughtered an incident?" another man in the truck retorted with a glare.

"A goddamn lunatic came from nowhere, causing a huge amount of trouble. He was extremely strong, but I think he had gone crazy from Miasma like he was on the verge of turning. He killed god knows how many zombies, but then the Miasma in the area started to go haywire," the man continued.

"Then everything turned crazy. Elite undead started to gather in droves, seemingly looking for the madman. We think he might have turned into a zombie lord or something, judging by the amount of Miasma that entered him," the man opposite spat with a frown. "We got caught in the middle of it. We got butchered. If I find that asshole..."

"You'll what?" a scarred man sitting in a corner of the truck snorted. "Piss your pants? That guy was crazy strong, and now he's a zombie to boot."

Zac had to force his face to stay neutral as he heard the explanation. He had no idea that he'd turned out to be a calamity not only for the zombies but the humans as well. He couldn't let them know he was the one responsible for the chaos. Otherwise, they'd likely rip him apart for revenge.

Suddenly, he was quite happy that his whole appearance had undergone a transformation during his flight. Not only was his hair gone, but his face had changed back to its original

since he wasn't able to keep his disguise going. Even his frame had drastically changed in only two days, making it nigh impossible to know he was the responsible party.

He felt extremely bad about the situation and made a mental promise to try to help out the villages affected by his actions in the future. But for now, he had to stay silent on the matter, even if it was unethical.

“So you're heading there to rest up?” Zac asked.

“We need to warn the monastery about the developments in the Dead Zone, and hopefully, some of our party are heading there as well. We got split up when we fled,” Sui answered as she looked down, fiddling with her fingers.

Zac simply nodded and reclined back against the wall.

“What about you?” the gruff man asked. “If you ask me, you're extremely suspicious. What were you doing so far into the Dead Zone?”

“I originally am from Perseverance on the west side of the incursion. I heard a rumor about a town having a lot of Caucasian cultivators on the east side. I was trying to get there to find a good team, but I got turned around,” Zac answered, mixing some truth with lies.

“You crossed the whole Dead Zone... to find a party?” the gruff man asked suspiciously.

“I accidentally got in an argument with the purifier in Perseverance, so my situation got a bit... complicated.” Zac shrugged. “None of the teams would take me in.”

A few of the people in the truck snickered at that, throwing a glance at Sui, who frowned.

“It's disgusting how some of us use our gifts for personal gain when we should strive to help mankind,” she said with a sour face.

“Not everyone is as idealistic as you, girl.” An old man sitting on the other side of Sui spoke up for the first time. “Most are just trying to survive.”

They kept talking for a while, and Zac was happy to find out that the monastery was to the east, roughly halfway between the core and the edge of the Dead Zone, which meant that they were driving in the right direction.

They didn't really know about any town like the one Zac described, though some of the monks might know, as quite a few of the elite zombie hunters had passed through there and left some intelligence behind.

After a while, Zac was starting to feel drained once again by the bead, but Sui seemed to sense it somehow. She quickly started to heal him again, while the man on the opposite side snorted after throwing Zac a glare.

After driving a few hours, the truck stopped, but apparently, it was only for a quick bathroom break and to switch drivers. The others seemed eager to get out of the cramped truck and quickly jumped out one by one. In just seconds, only Sui and Zac were left behind, as she was in the middle of once again healing him, or rather, feeding the greedy core in his body.

"Don't mind what the others said earlier..." Sui suddenly said with a low voice as she imbued him with her healing skill.

"About pretending to be a monk? I don't mind. I kinda look like one," Zac answered with a shrug.

"No, not that... About you causing the deaths of our teammates. I know you didn't mean for that to happen. I guess it has to do with the weird thing in your body?"



## DIVINE MOUNTAIN

Various thoughts ran through Zac's head as he leveled an even stare at Sui, to the point that she quickly started to get flustered.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to surprise you. Your face and body are different, but your energy feels the same. I only know it because my class has given me some unique skills. The others don't know. I promise I won't tell, so please don't do anything drastic," she quickly explained in a hurried flurry of words.

"I understand. Thank you for your discretion. You can call me David," Zac said after a while and closed his eyes, once again using the nickname he'd chosen on the other side of the Dead Zone.

The silence might have been a bit oppressive to the purifier because she quickly got out of the van as well as soon as she was done imbuing him with another round of energy. That left Zac alone in the van, going over what she'd said. In the end, he felt it wasn't a big deal that she knew. If she didn't even tell those in her team, she wouldn't tell anyone else.

Since he was alone for the moment, he quickly took out a bunch of dried meat and stuffed himself, almost inhaling the strips made from high-leveled beasts. Sui's efforts were very effective in keeping the bead happy, but that alone wasn't enough. His body felt as though he'd been starving for months, lacking not only energy but nourishment.

With his attributes, he had an extreme metabolism. If he didn't eat a lot, he'd only get worse. In just seconds, Zac actually managed to stuff his face with over a kilo of high-grade meat and a couple of liters of water from a canteen. After a brief hesitation, he took out another flask and took a small sip from it.

It was actually extremely diluted Cosmic Water, containing roughly one percent of the high-energy liquid. As it entered his body, he felt the familiar burn through his pathways, but with the low amount of water, it was just a small flash of warmth before it turned into Cosmic Energy.

It was the highest concentration he dared to drink at the moment, but even this mixture was harmful if he imbibed too much. It did, however, give a small boost to his completely depleted reserves of Cosmic Energy, which improved his bodily functions in general.

Drinking it was partly to invigorate his body, but mainly in order to stay prepared. While Sui seemed nice enough, he didn't really trust the others. If it came to it, he needed to be able to protect himself. Besides, they were still in the Dead Zone; anything could happen.

Zac would have liked to continue eating, but approaching voices told him his feast was over, so he quickly put away his Cosmos Sack again. The trip was largely uneventful after that, as they only traveled on roads far away from civilization. They entered a sort of routine where nothing really happened apart from Sui infusing some energy into Zac every hour or so.

They never stopped driving and kept going nonstop. The only times they stopped were when they found abandoned vehicles, where they tried to salvage some leftover gas with practiced ease. It was the middle of the night when they made another such stop, and the old man jumped out of the back of the truck with a hose and a can.

However, it didn't take long before the calm of the night was interrupted by multiple roars from zombies.

"Attack!" A shout from outside came, and within seconds, the rest of the people in the truck were up on their feet and



outside.

Zac had to admit that these people seemed to have more combat experience than even his Valkyries. Perhaps trying some recruiting in the area would be a good idea. For a second, he thought about going out to help, but a quick check told him his body was in no condition yet. The energy he got from the Cosmic Water was just enough to keep him going at full power for a couple of seconds, and he didn't want to waste it on some mindless zombies.

Instead, he took the chance to once again replenish his body. He stuffed his face with dried meat and once again downed it with a mouthful of diluted Cosmic Water. It was simply too hard to restore energy naturally in the Dead Zone, as most of the Cosmic Energy was converted into Miasma. Taking out a bunch of crystals would be suspicious as well, leaving him with only this option.

"Aren't you relaxed, having a drink while we're out here risking our lives," a grunt suddenly came from outside.

Surprised, Zac quickly looked over, and to his annoyance, it was the man who sat opposite him, Wang Fang. It appeared that the man had actually snuck back toward the truck while the fight was still going. Zac sincerely felt that the man's name was completely apt, as he had been a complete wang since Zac woke up.

"Unfortunately, I'm not in shape to help at the moment," Zac slowly responded, as what the man said was in a sense true.

"Even worse, you've also been hiding rations while enjoying ours," the man pressed on as he jumped into the van. "Makes me wonder what else you have been hiding. I knew we should have frisked you when Sui picked you up."

Zac's brows scrunched up, and he started to wonder if he would have to waste the little energy he'd restored in order to break some bones. He couldn't have the man search him, even if it meant that he'd have a falling-out with the people in the truck. The wealth on his person was beyond anything they could imagine, and it would create chaos.

Zac slowly started to rotate his Cosmic Energy through his parched pathways, getting ready for a quick surprise strike. However, he was relieved to hear that the fighting had died down outside, and footsteps were approaching the truck.

Wang Fang tsked in annoyance, but quickly snatched the flask out of Zac's hand and backed away with a triumphant sneer. However, his face quickly changed as the sweet aroma from the Cosmic Water drew his attention, and he unhesitatingly took a swig from the canteen.

"You really shouldn't drink that. It is poison, and it will be the end of you," Zac said with a frown.

However, Wang ignored him and greedily swallowed one mouthful after another with a blissful expression on his face.

At this moment, the others entered the truck, frowning at the scene.

"What's going on?" the old man, who appeared to be some sort of leader, asked.

"Our little guest has been hoarding treasures all along," Wang Fang said and showed them the flask triumphantly. "I found him drinking from this when I looked inside. It's some magical water that instantly restored all my Cosmic Energy from just a few mouthfuls."

Some murmurs erupted from the others as they greedily looked at the flask, apart from Sui, who looked aghast at the situation. Wang seemed emboldened by the attention and Zac's silence, so he kept going.

"Not only that, the flask itself is a treasure, as it contains an endless amount of the Treasure Water," he said, looking at Zac with a sneer. "I bet this thing is why you had to flee into the Dead Zone. You probably stole it and got chased."

"I'll give you a final warning," Zac said with a shrug. "That bottle contains diluted Cosmic Water. It will restore your Cosmic Energy, but it will also ruin your pathways. I only took a small sip to restore my depleted energy, but that was because I had no alternative. Drinking it like you did will only end in tragedy."

“You stole it from David? Fang-ge, what kind of man have you become?” Sui said with disappointment. “Return it immediately.”

“It’s okay. It’s nothing valuable,” Zac said with a wave before he looked at the others in the truck. “You were benevolent and helped me in my time of need, so I wish you no harm. Stay away from that liquid.”

“Not wanting us to waste your treasure?” Wang snorted. “I bet you’re planning to steal it back. Sorry, but it will stay with me from now on. This will be what pushes our squad to greatness.”

Zac shook his head, not wanting to bother with the fool any longer. If he wanted to kill himself, he was welcome to. Besides, the flask was nothing expensive, just a little Cosmic Water diluted in normal water. It was nothing compared to the small lake of the stuff he possessed.

Instead, he closed his eyes and rested. In the end, a few others tasted the water, and all marveled at its magical effects. However, the old man, Sui, and another man declined, instead opting to slowly restore themselves with Nexus Crystals. Since they didn’t take it any further or try to frisk him for any more treasures, Zac let the matter end there.

Between Sui’s help and his slow recuperation, he was over 15% restored by now, by his own account. It wasn’t optimal, but it was enough to rebuff some zombie hunters if it came to that. But Zac felt that what they would go through in the future was punishment enough. He remembered how addictive the water was; it felt like one could keep going and fight forever with the stuff. But reality would catch up with them soon enough.

After the confrontation, the atmosphere in the truck became quite oppressive, with no one really in the mood to speak up. Zac knew that if it weren’t for Sui, he would have been attacked, or at least thrown out by now. It was lucky for him that no one wanted to anger the purifier, as it might result in their death tomorrow from lack of treatment.

Zac considered whether he should just start to bring out his meat and some crystals, and beat them up if they got greedy for his things. But in the end, he gave up on the idea, as he didn't want to rock the boat. He needed to get infused by the energy from Sui, so he decided to stay put until they arrived at the monastery.

Instead, they sat in silence, the hours feeling like days. Zac wasn't sure how long they'd driven, but suddenly, his eyes opened due to a change in the atmosphere. The concentration of Miasma was rapidly declining, to the point that it was almost gone after twenty seconds of driving.

The others in the truck sensed it as well and stretched their legs as they cracked their necks. The truck stopped only a minute later, and everyone quickly got out. This time, Zac didn't stay behind, and for the first time in over a day, he got up on his feet and walked out of the stuffy truck.

By now Sui had infused him over thirty times, and his body finally didn't feel like it was teetering on the brink of collapse. Even better, the air was completely free from Miasma, and Zac felt his body slowly start to absorb energy to deplete his wrung-out body.

With a grunt, he jumped out of the truck, but he immediately froze when he looked at the area, and he gaped in awe. As he looked around, it almost felt like he was in a dream, standing at the foot of Mount Meru.

The sky was an intense blue, the gloomy clouds of the Dead Zone just a distant memory. The surroundings were draped in lush greenery, with rice paddies covering most of the base of a towering mountain that rose to the skies. The fields were tended by at least a hundred monks, dressed in simple kasayas, and it was easy to forget that they were surrounded by zombies from the pastoral scenery.

The greenery actually stopped some ways up the mountain, being replaced by sheer walls and cliffs. More amazingly, the mountain itself was almost completely covered with text, huge letters leaving barely any surfaces unaltered.

It was not the fractals of the System or any foreign species, Zac knew from a glance. He was by no means an expert in the area, but he was pretty sure it was some sort of Indian text, likely Sanskrit, as it was a Buddhistic mountain.

However, Zac had never heard of something like this magical mountain before the integration. Engraving a whole mountain was an unfathomable undertaking, and the carvings would have made it world renowned. So Zac's best guess was that the engravings had been added after the world got integrated, which made sense since something like this should be a lot easier when one's attributes had improved.

More surprisingly, he felt that the Sanskrit wasn't just decoration, as there were hints of power in the letters. They held a subdued but intractable strength, making Zac even doubt he could cause a crack in the stones. Together they formed something unfathomable, giving the whole mountain almost a divine aura.



## INVITATION

Since he'd heard about it, Zac had wondered how a monastery could stand strong in the middle of the Dead Zone, wantonly purifying the area. He would have thought that the undead leaders would have purged the area and flattened the mountain, not wanting to leave such a cancer in their backyard. But he had a feeling that the tens of thousands of letters were part of the answer somehow.

Some distance from them, a set of stone stairs led up the mountain, simple and unadorned compared to the rest of the area. At its end far up the mountain, Zac could vaguely spot a few roofs of the monastery, though much of it was shrouded in a white mist.

“Are we really still in the Dead Zone?” Zac couldn't help asking with a subdued voice to Sui, who stood next to him.

“Buddha guards this place, and the mountain grows stronger every day. It is the beacon of hope for many of us,” Sui answered with reverence in her eyes as she looked up at the shrouded monastery in the distance.

A deep gong suddenly spread out from the top of the mountain, somehow clearing Zac's mind in an instant. For months, worries had plagued his mind, and new issues kept cropping up. However, it was all blown away by the sound, and it appeared it was the same for Sui, as she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. The two simply stood and took in the tranquility for another few seconds until a jarring voice broke the serenity.

“That’s him! He pretended to be a monk. I think he works for the undead, trying to spy on you!”

Zac couldn’t help rolling his eyes as he looked over in the direction the sound came from. Wang Fang stood some distance away, clearly trying to suck up to two monks.

Both monks appeared to be some sort of guards, as they each held a staff with some iron hoops at the end. Just looking at them, Zac sensed they had to be at least level 30 from their presence. The two guards looked back at him, though they looked confused rather than anything else.

The others of the party stood some distance away, looking at the proceedings with troubled faces. Clearly, they didn’t want to get involved in what was going on, neither speaking up for Zac nor helping Wang Fang.

Zac took the accusation in stride, as he didn’t feel it would be very hard to prove his innocence. He was especially sure of that, as he’d just received a prompt he had never seen before. After mulling it over a few seconds, he made his choice, making the prompt disappear again.

However, Sui wasn’t as calm as she scurried over toward the two monks, who both seemed to recognize her. As soon as she approached, they both put their hands together and bowed in greeting.

“Don’t listen to Fang. He’s talking crazy. We accidentally hit David with our truck on the way here,” she said, and followed up with a quick recounting of the situation.

The two monks looked a bit troubled at the situation, but soon one of the two hurried toward the long stairs leading toward the monastery while the other one walked over toward Zac, much to the joy of Wang Fang.

“Patron, please accommodate this penniless monk and stay for a moment. While Patron Sui is a respected guest of the monastery, it is still a fact that you contain an unordinary amount of yin energy. Please stand by while we confer with our senior brothers,” the monk said with a courteous bow.



“That’s fine. I’ll look at your mountain for a bit. It is very interesting,” Zac said as he sat down.

Zac truly didn’t mind the wait, as he found the inscriptions extremely interesting. Every type of inscription he’d encountered so far came from the System or integrated societies, and they all had one thing in common.

They were based on the fractals that made up the skills and pathways for Cosmic Energy. The fractals from the System felt the purest and most unadulterated, whereas the ones from the Creators and demons differed in various ways. However, they shared the same root.

From how Zac understood it, the fractals were the language of the Dao, and they contained hints of various truths. That was why it was possible to study skill fractals to slowly gain insight into the Dao. It was all based on a cohesive system drawn up by the Apostate of Order billions of years ago.

It was different with the Sanskrit writings on the mountain walls, as they had nothing to do with the fractals. Zac couldn’t understand how it was possible to draw power from something that seemed to be its own system rather than the System of the Multiverse.

It felt like a true miracle that the monastery somehow had managed to create something with Earth scripture. As for exactly what the mountain did, Zac still wasn’t completely sure. It emitted a pressure as heavy as the world, yet at the same time, it was as light as a feather.

The only thing he could figure out after watching it for twenty minutes was that the mountain itself was the thing responsible for converting the Miasma in the area. But that was likely only part of the capabilities of the mountain.

For the monastery to still stand strong, it likely possessed some sort of defensive or offensive abilities as well. Otherwise, Mhal or one of his colleagues would have just destroyed the whole thing. Abbot Everlasting Peace should be quite powerful, but in the end, he was only level 41. He

shouldn't be able to fend off the whole undead hordes with his own power.

One possibility he thought of was that this monastery had been chosen as an outpost, and the monks were given a crystal just like his. Maybe they possessed some extremely strong arrays that kept the area safe in case of attack. However, Zac hadn't gained access to those kinds of arrays until he'd finished the first incursion quest.

He didn't really make any headway with the scriptures, so he didn't mind seeing a couple of monks slowly descend the stairs and walk toward him.

"Amitabha, patron. Abbot Everlasting Peace has asked for your company if convenient," the monk said with a bow.

The old monk himself seemed quite confused about the invitation, and the same could be seen on the others. However, Zac himself wasn't too surprised. When he'd arrived at the monastery, he got the option from the System to make his presence known, which he'd accepted.

"Sounds good," Zac only said and got to his feet. "Let me just talk with my travel companions."

With a few steps, he walked over to the group, who now sat around a table having dinner some distance away, with the group of warrior monks following close behind. Sui looked over with a troubled face, but Zac spoke up before she could say anything.

"Thank you for your help over the past days. I am not sure I would have survived without your gift of life. If possible, I will return the favor in the future."

"You need to survive impersonating a venerable first," Wang Fang retorted with a gleeful face, clearly misunderstanding the presence of the monks behind Zac.

The others looked troubled, especially the old man, who looked back and forth between Zac and the monks respectfully standing behind him with a slight frown on his face. Zac only ignored Wang, much to his annoyance.

“You are welcome. I believe helping you will be the largest karmic contribution of my life,” Sui answered with sincerity, drawing surprised glances from the others.

Wang Fang seemed completely infuriated by the comment and looked ready to go another round. However, he wasn't given the opportunity, as Zac simply left toward the stairs with the monks in tow.

As he reached the stairs, he saw that they weren't actually unadorned like it seemed from the distance. They were covered with scripts as well, with Sanskrit covering both the left and right sides, leaving only a small part of the middle clear to step on.

“There are two thousand seven hundred stairs leading up to the Monastery of Everlasting Peace. Each step is inscribed with a line from the Diamond Sutra. The sutra is then repeated nine times. To walk the stairs is to search for enlightenment through repetition,” the elderly monk commented as he saw Zac gaze upon the text.

Zac only nodded in response as he took the first step on the stairs. As he did, a small pressure landed on his shoulders, but it wasn't to the point of really bothering him. Mostly unencumbered, he kept walking up the stairs as he looked at the inscriptions on the sides.

The monks behind Zac looked at each other with some surprise, but quickly followed Zac up the stairs. No one spoke as they kept walking up one step at a time. Zac couldn't help but look at each line as he walked, being drawn to the words. He couldn't actually read the Sanskrit, but through his language skill, he still got a sense of what it said.

Of course, that was just the surface. The sutras of Buddhism and Hinduism were notoriously cryptic, and one could spend their whole life pondering their layers. However, he was surprised to sense that he got a different inspiration from the 301st step compared to the 1st. The inscriptions were the same, yet their meaning was somehow different.

Curious, Zac kept climbing, trying to absorb whatever the Diamond Sutra was trying to tell him. The formless pressure

was gaining slightly in strength with each of his steps, and by the time he reached the seventh iteration of the Diamond Sutra, it started to become quite strenuous, to the point that Zac was unsure whether he'd make it all the way.

Zac was contemplating whether he should start rotating his Cosmic Energy or ask the monks walking behind him what was going on. But in the end, he felt that would somehow be losing, or failing some test. The monks behind him walked without any effort, telling Zac it wasn't an issue of strength. Even the old man looking to be at least seventy wasn't even panting, only kindly smiling at him when Zac looked back.

Since the old man wasn't using Cosmic Energy, Zac instead summoned his Dao of Trees as he kept walking. He felt he was onto something, as the pressure drastically lessened, and released a Dao Field around his body. More surprisingly, it felt as though the meaning of the inscriptions on the ground changed as he walked, instead starting to talk about his Dao.

As he ascended the last sets of steps, his Dao Field kept subtly changing, turning more solid and robust. When he finally stood at the end of the stairs, the pressure suddenly completely disappeared, and his Dao Field spread out over fifty meters, twice what he'd managed earlier.

His mind was crystal clear as he stood still for a few breaths, only pondering on his recent insights into the Dao. The stairs and its inscriptions had somehow stabilized his evolved seed, something that might normally have taken him weeks of meditation.

"Amitabha, patron. All is none. Heart is all," the old monk said behind Zac as he bowed toward him.

"I feel like I have been given a huge gift here," Zac said as he looked down at the stairs leading back toward the base of the mountain.

"If you light a lamp for somebody, it will also brighten your own path. Remember, the Dao comes from the heart. The heart can manifest the myriad Dao, but also endless worries,"

the old monk said with a kindly smile. “This way, patron. The abbot is waiting.”

The other monks in the party seemed much friendlier to Zac after he ascended the steps, and with a bow, they left him and the old man. The monastery wasn't too big, Zac noted as they walked, and perhaps it could house a thousand monks. Then again, they were on a mountain, and perhaps there were a bunch of monks living as hermits in caves.

The temple was simple and austere but in spotless condition. There was a solemn silence in the air, and the area exuded an ancient aura. Zac felt it would taint the tranquility if he spoke here, so he let the old man lead him in complete silence through the compound.

After a few minutes, they had walked to the back of the temple, and Zac noted with some surprise they passed the larger halls. Instead, it appeared they headed toward a small courtyard hidden in the back. It was small and unassuming and absolutely not the place Zac thought the abbot would stay.

A few monks sat and meditated on a square in front of the gates to the small courtyard, and they all opened their eyes when they heard the footsteps of Zac and the old monk. Even Zac felt some pressure when faced with the calm stares of the monks in front of him.

Zac realized that while these monks might not be on the Ladder, they likely weren't too far off. Besides, judging by the mysterious things going on at the monastery, they might actually be stronger than some Rankers in reality.

The old man simply placed his hands together in greeting and led Zac into the small courtyard. There actually were two layers of doors, and before opening the second door, the old man first closed the outer one. When the old man opened the inner door next, Zac was blanketed with an extremely dense amount of Cosmic Energy, to the point that it could rival the small cave beneath the lake of Cosmic Water.

As they entered, Zac was surprised to see that most of the inner courtyard was covered by a pond, though it seemed to be normal water. Zac saw a few koi swimming about, but that

wasn't what drew his attention. In the middle of the pond was a huge lotus flower, reaching at least three meters across, and on top of it sat a monk staring out at the sunset.

The imagery was quite striking, but that wasn't enough to shock Zac. He was still left gaping, however, from the torrents of pure healing powers that swirled around the flower. It was as though the old monk sat in the middle of a hurricane wrought from pure life.



## ABBOT EVERLASTING PEACE

Initially when they entered, Zac could only see the side of the old monk sitting on the lotus. However, as Zac was led around the pond to a seat facing the abbot, his brows rose in shock.

His first impression of Abbot Everlasting Peace was that he was teeming with life, but his appearance truly didn't match. The old man sat in a classic meditating pose, but there was a huge hole in his chest right where his lungs and heart should be.

The loose robes the old monk wore covered some of the wound, but Zac could actually see the sky through the hole in the old man's chest. The abbot's face was equally grisly, with huge, jagged scars lining his face that made Zac's scars seem like small beauty marks.

Furthermore, having been on the receiving end of the Corpse-lord, Zac recognized the aura coming from the wounds. It was clear it had been done by some undead powerhouse. The Miasma was mostly cleansed in the old man, but some hints remained, and the scars were still slightly blackened.

His eyes were closed, and Zac sensed he was in the middle of cultivation, as energy swirled around him like a whirlwind in slow motion. Zac's eyes turned to the flower underneath the monk, as the energies it emitted were extremely pure.

Zac even guessed the flower might be a treasure of the grade of the Fruit of Ascension, though its function likely was separate. Judging by the state of the old man, he might not



even be able to leave the flower, as it was continuously pouring healing energies into his body.

The old monk who led Zac to the courtyard wordlessly bowed to the abbot and Zac before he left again, closing the doors to the courtyard behind him.

Zac was happy to wait for the old monk to wake up, as some of the spillover from the flower actually entered himself, nourishing even better than Sui's healing skills did. It felt as though his parched body was slowly being submerged into a pure river, with him slowly absorbing the water.

It made Zac wonder just how potent it was to sit in the center of the flower. After roughly thirty minutes, the old man finally roused himself.

"Amitabha, benefactor," the old man said as he slowly opened his eyes. "I apologize for making you see this embarrassing sight."

"That's okay. Uh, no offense, but how are you alive?" Zac couldn't help asking as his eyes once again were drawn to the hole in the old man's chest.

"Do not worry; I am not one of the yin creatures you've met outside," the old man said with a kindly smile, though it was somewhat marred from the scars.

"This penniless monk was wounded in battle. I am ashamed to admit it, but I am not ready to enter the samsara. My home has turned into a hell on earth. If I don't stay and fight, who will? Perhaps I performed meritorious deeds in a past life, as the universe bestowed me with this treasure in my moment of need," he said as he pointed down at the lotus flower.

"It is prolonging this one's life and slowly provides healing," the abbot said. "Unfortunately, it means I am not able to leave it, and won't be for a long while."

"It seems quite special; sitting here is helping me out as well. I'm Zac, by the way. Thank you for receiving me," Zac simply said.

“Benefactor showed great merit when you laid one of the leaders of this incursion to rest. Receiving you is the least this poor temple could do,” this old man said with a small smile.

“Oh? How did you know that?” Zac asked curiously.

The abbot only kept smiling as a screen opened up in front of Zac.

**Life versus Death (Unique): Triumph over the six lords of undeath and the Lich King of the Undead Incursion. Reward: Infallible Sutra, unique building depending on performance. (3/7).**

Zac was shocked when he saw the quest. It was very similar to his own old quest, Off With Their Heads, as it was based on killing the leaders of an incursion. That wasn't what surprised him, though; it was the fact that the progress was already at 3/7.

Zac was quite sure that Mhal was one of the three, but that still meant that two of the generals had already been killed before his battle. While it might not seem like much compared to Zac killing all four of the heralds before two months were over, he knew the two couldn't be compared.

Clan Azh'Rezak was a fledgling demonic clan that only got the opportunity to invade a new planet through dumb luck, and the resources they could put into the invasion were severely limited. Meanwhile, the Undead Empire was one of the largest forces in the Multiverse, with resources and means that Zac couldn't even imagine.

Of course, the undead force that invaded Earth was just some insignificant branch of the empire, but still, the foundations would have to be on another level compared to Ogras' clan. That was easily displayed by the fact that Ogras was barely as strong as just one of the lords, but likely no match against the actual Lich King. Mhal and his colleagues would probably have no trouble slaughtering the beasts that were the heralds of the demonic incursion.

“I barely survived the fight against the undead lord. I can't believe you have managed to kill two of them,” Zac said, not

hiding his awe.

“They came two months ago to destroy this mountain. An army of undead led by two generals. With some special means and luck, we managed to prevail. However, the fight resulted in this embarrassing appearance,” the monk explained. “This mountain warded off evil and protected us in our time of need. However, my brothers tell me the undead are growing stronger. I am not sure how long it will take until they try again.

“Perhaps the death of one more of their own might give us more time to prepare,” Abbot Everlasting Peace continued.

“Hopefully, our force can be of assistance soon. Currently, they are closing up another incursion,” Zac said, referring to the Ratmen Incursion at Billyville.

The operation should have started by now, and Zac hoped they would be successful in closing it down. It would free up another powerhouse to join the battle against the other incursions.

“But I believe this undead incursion must be closed as soon as possible. They can’t be allowed to keep growing for much longer,” Zac continued.

“The undead disrupt the harmony between life and death and deny poor souls samsara. This penniless monk would be most indebted by any assistance benefactor can bring,” the abbot said. “But I believe that is not why benefactor visited this old man?”

Zac pondered a bit on how to frame his next questions. It was generally quite rude to ask about secrets to cultivation from outsiders, as it was akin to asking them for their weaknesses. However, the situation on Earth was desperate, and Zac felt it wasn’t time to be bashful.

“I gained my strength by singlehandedly closing an incursion,” Zac said, explaining his situation to an outsider for the first time. “It has awarded me with various benefits that snowballed into a huge advantage in power over perhaps anyone on this planet. Yet I fear it’s not enough. I have no

confidence in defeating the Lich King as I am, and there are many more invaders out there.

“I am looking for any methods to get stronger, and seeing the mountain and your monks tells me I have much to learn from you. Can you tell me how your insight into the Dao is so high?”

“Did you know? This penniless monk had never left this mountain before the integration,” the old man responded with a smile. “I also never contributed much to the monastery. I believed that to understand karma, you first needed to sever karma.

“This monk only sat and pondered on the sutras and what the Buddhist Dharma meant, but I realize now that was just selfishness. Only when I stepped out from my courtyard did I come to understand things that had been hazy mysteries for decades.

“What is the point of understanding karma if you do not spread goodness through karma?” the old man asked, seemingly rhetorically.

“Dao, faith, insight, truth, enlightenment. All are names for the same thing as this one sees it. Understanding of the self and the universe. This mountain has been consecrated in the Dao for thousands of years, and it gained spirituality. The sutras are the basis for its being; therefore, they have power. Our hearts give them power; therefore, they are powerful,” Abbot Everlasting Peace said as he looked up at the sky before once again focusing on Zac.

Zac wasn't sure what to make of the old man's explanation. He wasn't a spiritual person before the fall and didn't really understand some of the things these monks said.

He was sure that there was a lesson to be learned from how the old monk gained power, but at the same time, it might not apply to himself. They walked different paths, his wrought with blood and carnage. The old monk seemed to understand Zac's confusion and only shook his head.

“Benefactor doesn’t need to become a monk and read scriptures to improve the Dao. This old man believes that finding the answers is not about following a certain procedure. It is about being true to your nature and your heart. If you try to force enlightenment, it will always be out of reach. You will become an old man looking up at the clouds in despair,” he said.

“But if you follow your nature and your heart, the myriad Dao will open themselves to you.”

Zac slowly nodded, somewhat understanding what the old man was driving at. However, suddenly, he had an epiphany.

“Nature...” Zac murmured with his eyes widening.

What he gained wasn’t some realization in regard to the Dao, but rather about inscriptions, though it all tied together. He realized he’d been naïve when he thought of the fractals of the Creators and the demons as simple or flawed.

The Creators were among the greatest craftsmen in the Multiverse; there was no reason they shouldn’t be able to create fractals that looked the same as the ones the System used. However, they still inscribed the squarish ones that had reminded Zac of old-school computer text.

It was the same with the demons. Their fractals looked a bit crude in comparison to the one that adorned his robes, but after living with them for months, Zac knew they weren’t some barbarians.

Why couldn’t they simply alter their scripts a bit to look like the ones from the System? The design of those fractals wasn’t anything uncommon, as they could simply buy basic gear from the General Store. Add to that the thousands of years of research they had.

Only now did Zac understand that it was a deliberate choice. The scripts the two factions used were more closely aligned with their nature. The strength of an inscription wasn’t dictated by how close it looked to a “real” fractal, but by the insight and skill of the inscriber.

Zac now realized that the power of the inscriptions likely got stronger, not weaker, when the inscriptions were more suited to the nature of the Creator. For the same reason, the Sanskrit covering the mountain was close to the nature of these monks, which was why they gained power.

This was what the abbot was trying to tell him. Zac was looking at the Dao like there was an answer sheet, and Zac had hoped the abbot had a few of the answers he didn't possess yet. But Dao was an individual journey.

He should be looking inward to find his own nature and what Dao suited him and his path instead of trying to find tricks or Dao fruits that would give him shortcuts or answers to questions he wasn't even asking.

"Benefactor is still hurt from earlier. Why not keep this penniless monk company for a few days?" the abbot suddenly said, dragging Zac out of his thoughts.

"Actually, I am in the region on a mission," Zac said with some hesitation. "I can't stay overly long."

It would be nice to stay in this courtyard for a bit since he was getting better by the second. The lotus was flooding the area with Vitality, after all, and he was still sorely lacking in that department.

"This old man can see benefactor has strong karmic ties to someone in the east. But it is not yet time," the abbot said.

"Nature does not hurry, yet all is accomplished."



## BLACK AND GOLD

“What do you mean?” Zac asked, confused.

“This penniless monk gained some minor insight into the Dao of Karma from his many decades of meditation. It has given me some unique skills in this new reality of ours. Karma ties you to a location to the east. However, if you leave now, you will likely fail in your goal,” the monk said with a calm voice.

Zac thought it over and couldn't find any reason the old man would lie. Still, it felt like too strong a power to be able to predict the future like that, at least for someone at level 40. That felt like something that was in the realm of gods.

“Why would I fail?” Zac asked with some skepticism.

“Because your yin and yang are currently out of balance,” the old man said as he pointed at Zac's stomach.

“Benefactor's wound may not look as bad as this one,” the abbot continued as he pointed at his chest. “But it is just as dangerous. I sense a storm inside you. Unless benefactor finds harmony, the yin outside the mountain will kill you.”

Zac grimaced, very aware of the problem. The wound in his side was calm at the moment, but that was only because there was bountiful vitality in this courtyard, almost to the point that it was like being constantly healed by a purifier.

The moment he stepped out from the mountain, the process of his vitality being sapped would likely restart again. As he'd sat and pondered in the back of the truck, he'd made some educated guesses about his situation. The suction of his



life force likely wasn't only because he was inside the Dead Zone, but because of the composition of the bead.

The core was mainly created from the Miasma of over a hundred thousand zombies along with a lot of ambient deathly energy. The opposing force was the ten purification pills along with his Dao of Vitality and Sui's ministrations. However, the pills and other life-attuned energies he absorbed were far less than the total amount of Miasma, to the point that at most 10% of the energy in the bead was life-based.

That meant that the absorption would likely continue even after he left the Dead Zone. His current idea was just to tough it out somehow until he found Kenzie, then hurry back to Port Atwood and hope Ogras or someone else had some idea. But perhaps the monk in front of him could provide some alternative solution.

"Do you have a way to cleanse away the Miasma in me?" Zac asked with some hope.

"Why would benefactor want to remove half of his self?"

"Half my what?" Zac asked, confused, afraid the monk had misunderstood him.

"If this poor monk may be blunt, I believe benefactor has not looked at the situation from all angles," Abbot Everlasting Peace said.

"Benefactor likely looks at the yin energy on the outside as something negative, akin to poison. However, this poor monk sees it as the other half of life. This poor monk sensed benefactor walk a path of life when he ascended the stairs. One might look at death as the opposite of life, but one can also see it as its shadow," the monk said.

Zac nodded in agreement, as that was basically what he'd based his latest insight of his Dao Seed around.

"One might say that the two restrain each other, but this penniless monk believes they can also nurture each other. Perhaps benefactor doesn't need to remove the yin, but rather bolster the yang," the monk concluded.

This was honestly something Zac had thought about before. He felt that he shouldn't even be alive, but a series of coincidences had left him with this odd core, and perhaps it was a ticket for him to go further than the conventional cultivator. He knew that reaching the higher tiers of power was beyond hard, and unless one encountered a continuous stream of lucky encounters, the road would likely end at E-grade or even lower.

However, there were a lot of question marks about choosing this path. First of all, he wasn't too sure if it fit his current Daos or his class. He was, in essence, an axe warrior with some nature-element skills on the side. The life-death path was something else.

He was afraid that he'd find himself at an impasse when he reached level 75. Alyn and Ogras had multiple times told him how extremely hard it was to walk the path of the elite, and that almost everyone got stuck at the bottleneck due to lacking the qualifications to go further.

Getting an Epic-graded class was nigh impossible unless you came from a high-tier background that had resources that a newly integrated world could only dream of. Perhaps if he spread himself too thin, he would lose everything. The situation on Earth was dire, and perhaps it was a mistake to take such a big gamble.

Like it or not, he was the main force against the incursions and Dominators. The incursions were possible to close without evolving due to the restrictions still in place, but that didn't hold true for the Dominators. They were already at level 100, far past the F-grade barrier.

He'd discussed the issue at length with Ogras and understood that the increase in strength from each level at E-grade was the same as a handful of levels for an F-grader. It wasn't impossible to skip grades and fight people who were at the beginning of a new grade, but the Dominators were too far past the delimiter. Even if they were trash who just had a lot of extra time, there was no way for Zac to defeat them at level 75.

So if Zac got himself stuck at the bottleneck for too long, the Dominators might just kill him and everyone else, even if he managed to close the incursions. The odd cultists of the Zhix were still shrouded in mystery. If they wanted, they should have been able to destroy the incursions without too much effort. Yet they were still biding their time, hiding in their burrows.

That fact only made Zac more nervous rather than the opposite. It felt like the Dominators were a ticking time bomb that could go off at any moment, and who knew what they had planned over the past six months.

“It might be a good idea, but the amount of Miasma in me is enormous. I had a purifier help me for over a day, and it barely put a dent in the life-attuned energy needed to reach a balance,” Zac said with a sigh.

“Well, perhaps this penniless monk can help benefactor on this front, but only if you’ve decided on your path,” the abbot said.

Zac thought it over for a good ten minutes, but finally, he decided to go with it after all. If the abbot could help, he would accept it. He already was determined to walk the path of the elite, and he felt that utilizing the core rather than discarding it was the path with more potential, even though it was a large risk. Cultivation was taking risks and defying fate. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

“Amitabha, this penniless monk can see benefactor has made his choice,” the monk said with a smile as he bent down and plucked something from the lotus flower beneath him. “This lotus seed contains part of the vitality of the flower. Though it is only a part, it is nigh boundless. Benefactor can slowly absorb it in order to supplement the yang.”

The torrent of life-attuned energy swirling around the lotus flower got distinctly weaker, and Zac suspected it lost around 20% of its power. Zac understood what kind of sacrifice the old man made as he looked at the wound in his chest.

“Why are you doing this?” Zac couldn’t help asking.

“Amitabha. Do good deeds to gain merit. If benefactor wishes to look it another way, see it as this penniless monk sowing seeds of karma,” the old monk said with a smile.

Zac said nothing more as he received the seed. He sat down and started absorbing the energy in the seed. It was as though an endless surge of pure life entered his body, and in just minutes, his drained body felt like it was back in top condition.

The core wasn't so easily satiated, though, as it greedily kept absorbing the energy from the seed. A storm of energy exited the seed as it entered Zac's body and gathered beneath his navel. The huge amounts of energy were painful, but Zac kept pushing his body to the limits in order to finish as quickly as possible.

After roughly twelve hours the speed of absorption started to dwindle slightly, allowing Zac to once again talk with the monk, who hadn't moved the whole time.

“Benefactor's body is truly resilient. If this penniless monk was able to absorb energy at that speed, I would have been able to leave this flower weeks ago,” the abbot said with a shake of his head.

“This gift is immeasurable,” Zac said. “I do not know how to repay you.”

Zac was regretting not buying the second Fruit of Ascension with contribution points so that he could give it to the old monk. He still was holding one, but he was planning on giving it to his sister.

Besides, it was unclear how helpful it would be to the man in front of him. The fruit didn't really have any healing properties, and Zac suspected the old man in front of him already had improved his constitution to E-grade. It would almost be impossible not to evolve after sitting in this level of Vitality for two straight months.

“Benefactor does not need to repay this old man. This penniless monk only wishes that benefactor does not give up on humanity and uses his gifts for good.”

Zac reluctantly nodded as he mentally promised himself that he'd find some way to make it up to the abbot as he looked inward. There were still surges of life-attuned energy entering his bead, but it had changed quite a bit since he looked at it last.

For one, it had almost doubled in size, and secondly, it wasn't pure black with some golden specks like before. It now held a much evened distribution of colors, though the black was still a majority. He guessed it would take another twelve to fifteen hours before he'd reach equilibrium.

More impressively, there actually seemed to be fractals naturally forming on the bead, though Zac had no idea what they meant. They were extremely intricate and written in both gold and black. It seemed there was a profundity behind them that still was beyond what Zac could understand.

As the two sat and absorbed the energies from the lotus flower, they discussed various things. The old man was a cultivator, which wasn't surprising to Zac. What was surprising was that most of the monks who had spent their life in the monastery were cultivators as well. It clashed with what he knew about the randomness of who was a cultivator and who wasn't.

Zac also gained some clues as to where his sister might be. The monk knew of a large town some distance away from the edge of the Dead Zone that was a drop-off zone for Caucasian cultivators. It was called Kingsbury, and it sounded like it would take Zac roughly two days to get there if he hurried.

What was worse was that the monk mentioned that the town had integrated with the New World Government a few weeks ago. Zac wasn't sure whether it was a coincidence or not, but it was cause for worry. However, he forced himself to stay put. It was as the abbot said, rushing would only have the opposite effect.

After another seventeen hours, Zac could sense that the core in his body was finally in equilibrium. He was extremely impressed with the lotus flower that the monk sat on. One

single seed was able to offset the entire amount of Miasma in his core, and there still was a good deal of energy left inside it.

However, when Zac made to give the seed back to the old man, he refused with a shake of his head.

“Keep the seed. It may come in handy,” the abbot said. “Remember, the heart is all.”

“Thank you, I will remember this,” Zac said as he stood up and walked toward the door.

He took one last look at the small courtyard and the congenial old man who sat looking up at the clouds with a smile on his face.

Soon Zac was running through the woods toward Kingsbury. The rumors that the abbot mentioned kept gnawing at him, making him unable to calm down. It felt too coincidental that the town was joining the government just as he was about to arrive.

It all smelled like a setup to him. They were trying to lure him to Kingsbury, but what kind of plan they had was unknown. The problem was that Zac couldn't understand why the government would do something like this. They had to know that if they took his sister hostage to harm him, they would put themselves square in his crosshairs.

They already knew how he dealt with things by looking at the aftermath in Greenworth. The stupidity of it all made Zac doubt whether he was just paranoid. Still, he would rather be safe than sorry, so he hurried toward the town, cutting a straight line through the forest.



## KINGSBURY

As soon as he had exited the sphere of protection from Mount Everlasting Peace, his core once again had started to absorb Miasma. However, it wasn't a problem for Zac anymore, as the lotus seed provided him with the life energy he needed. Besides, now that his core was balanced, the amount of life energy needed to maintain the balance was minuscule compared to before.

It went to show that while the bead was balanced, it was still able to absorb more energy. However, Zac wasn't sure whether pushing more energy into the core was something he should be aiming for until he knew what he was dealing with.

After talking with the abbot for almost a day, he didn't feel as bad about the bead anymore, rather the opposite. He was excited to dig into the mysteries it contained when he had some time. He was especially curious about the fractals that had somehow appeared by themselves on the small core. Perhaps they were a clue how to harness the massive energy the core contained.

Zac was still stunned by the generosity of the abbot. It was a bit of an uncomfortable feeling to be so far in debt to a stranger. No matter what Zac had tried while he absorbed energy from the bead, the abbot had refused to accept any gift in return, no matter if it was healing pills or crystals.

The only thing he could think of was to provide as much information as he could to the monks, from the various incursions to the threat of the Dominators and shape-shifters. He also set up an alliance with the monastery, which in a sense



was a large gift, as it gave the monks a path of retreat in case the undead came again.

It was a new function he possessed now that he was a Lord, which essentially allowed him to put individuals and factions on what could be seen as a “friend list” in a game. It would allow them to teleport to his teleportation array, even when it was closed to strangers.

It meant Zac had three modes to his teleporter now: private, trusted, and public. His teleporter was already set on trusted at the moment, which allowed anyone from his faction, and now also the monks, to use the teleporter. Otherwise, his troops would be stuck on the island and unable to join Billy.

As he ran through the forests toward the east, he kept trying various things. Between the stairs and the long talks with the abbot, he felt he’d gained a deeper understanding of the Dao, and he was trying to incorporate it into his fighting style.

Not only that, but he also needed to test his improved Dao Seed. During his fight with the ghost, he realized that the seed had gotten a lot more flexible since it got upgraded. He needed to know the effect of adding it to various skills.

His experimentation had an unexpected result, as his movement skill [**Loamwalker**] gained a level and reached Middle mastery. It was almost instantaneous after he incorporated his Dao of Trees into his steps, clearly showing what the criterion for the upgrade was.

Zac was elated, as the movement skill was integral to his fighting style. After the upgrade, he kept trying it out in various ways until he properly understood the changes.

Zac realized that his energy consumption decreased by quite a bit when he infused his legs with the Dao of Trees. It wasn’t to the point that he would be able to use it nonstop for hours, but it helped with one of the largest downfalls of the skill: its high energy consumption.

As for the effect of the upgrade itself, it was a simple upgrade to the range of the skill. At Low mastery, each step

could take him a few meters forward at the most, but after it improved to Middle rank, the range improved to around fifteen meters.

This, in essence, improved his maximum speeds by a few folds as well, as each step moved him forward around four times the distance compared to before. The downside was that the further he walked, the higher the consumption was, and to use the skill to its maximum effect was quite costly, even with the empowerment of the Dao.

As Zac kept going, he also found that good news sometimes came in pairs. The second day after he leveled up his movement skill, another prompt suddenly appeared in front of him. This time, it was the **[Forester's Constitution]** skill that gained a boost.

The only reason for the upgrade he could come up with was that it required time spent in forests to level up, since its boost was dependent on staying in forests. Other than that, he had no idea, as the skill was passive and not something he could train with.

The improvement wasn't great, though it was convenient. At Low rank, it gave a 10% boost to Endurance and Vitality as long as he was in a forest, and otherwise a 5% boost.

But at Middle proficiency, it gave an 11% boost as long as he'd been in a forest in the last twenty-four hours. It was quite convenient, as he wouldn't suddenly lose attributes the moment he entered a town anymore. The lower boost improved slightly as well, clocking in at 5.5%.

He'd hoped that his other new skills would have improved as well, but most of them were still at Early Proficiency, apart from **[Thousand Faces]**, which couldn't be improved upon. Still, as he opened up his menu, he felt his repertoire was starting to become quite diverse.

## **Skills**

**Inquisitive Eye – Proficiency: Early. See through their secrets. Upgradeable.**

**Book of Babel – Proficiency: Enlightenment through understanding.**

**Mental Fortress – Proficiency: Middle. Enduring Stability. Upgradeable.**

**Thousand Faces – Proficiency: If you hate who you are, change it. Upgradeable.**

**Nature's Barrier – Proficiency: Early. Brave a thousand storms with Gaia's protection. Upgradeable.**

**Axe Mastery – Proficiency: Late. The seed of Dao is planted. Upgradeable.**

**Chop – Proficiency: Late. There is greatness in simplicity.**

**Forester's Constitution – Proficiency: Middle. Man and Nature One Entity. Upgradeable.**

**Loamwalker – Proficiency: Middle. Trod the unbroken path. Upgradeable.**

**Nature's Punishment – Proficiency: Early. Awaken the wrath of the world. Upgradeable.**

He possessed most types of skills now. The only thing he felt he was missing was another attack skill. [**Chop**] was still good for weaker targets, but his only good attack for stronger enemies was [**Nature's Punishment**]. The problem with that skill was that it cost such a huge amount of energy, only allowing him to use it once in a fight.

Still, Zac didn't worry overly much, as he was only one level away from 60 and he was somewhat certain he'd gain another skill at that point. Therefore, he didn't avoid any towns or cities either as he pushed straight to his destination, trying to find targets to kill along the way.

Unfortunately, he realized he wouldn't gain his level before he arrived at Kingsbury, as there simply were almost no zombies around. He was closing in on the edge of the Dead Zone, and the towns he passed through were completely raided.

At first, there were some scattered zombies left, but after another half day of traveling, there wasn't a single one in sight. Zac didn't really care, as there would always be opportunities to get the level at a later point.

Another day passed as Zac kept moving, finally exiting the Dead Zone proper. Kingsbury wasn't a real frontier town, but rather some distance further away. It only took an hour for him to reach the town with the help of his Automatic Map.

The town was of decent size, at least comparable to what was left of Greenworth. However, he didn't recognize any of the structures, so Zac suspected that only the cultivators got dropped off here. The other parts of Greenworth had likely ended up somewhere else.

The order in the town seemed quite a bit better than most places, as the guards didn't exhort him for a bribe when he tried to enter. He'd already changed his face with [**Thousand Faces**] again, not wanting to let anyone know about his presence before he found out about the fate and whereabouts of his sister.

This time, he didn't accept when the prompt that showed up as he entered, not wanting to make his presence known. He had asked the abbot about the prompt, and the old man hadn't heard about that function either, telling Zac it likely was unique to Lords.

He still didn't understand how it worked, as he hadn't gotten the prompt in the beginning after becoming a Lord. Zac guessed that only the monastery was run by someone powerful enough, and the System gave him an option to give due respect and announce himself.

As for Kingsbury, he soon realized it was due to it having come under the control of the government, another powerful entity.

After having entered the town proper, Zac did what he used to do for information and simply entered the first restaurant he saw. He was surprised to find that the inside smelled of stale alcohol apart from just food.

He looked around and saw that people were drinking something, though they didn't really seem to be enjoying the taste.

He sat down at a counter and simply ordered the drink the others forced down their throats.

"Don't recognize you. New in town?" the man asked with some disinterest as he poured a glass.

"Yeah. I heard a bunch of cultivators from Greenworth are here? Is that true?" Zac answered, trying to sound casual as he took a swig. "Heurk, is this gasoline?"

"It's Kingsbury moonshine. Kicks a punch, doesn't it?" the bartender said with a laugh. "Yeah, they're here, though maybe only two thousand of them are left alive. Dangerous on the frontier," the bartender said with a shrug.

"How would I go about finding an old friend?" Zac asked with a wheeze, his throat feeling like it was on fire.

"Government's taking a census now that they're in control. Could ask them? But it's a bit chaotic with the trials coming up," the bartender answered.

"Trials?" Zac asked with a sinking feeling.

"Yeah, some government hotshots are holding it."

"What did the people do?" Zac asked.

"Well, all kinds of things, it seems," the bartender hesitantly answered.

"It's bullshit!" a drunken man from some distance away suddenly shouted. "They are just rounding up people they don't like and slapping bullshit charges on them."

"Jeez, calm down. You'll get yourself into trouble," another man said as he dragged the drunkard out of the tavern.

"No point in staying here if the government is going to get involved. There are tons of frontier towns welcoming able fighters," another man muttered.

From there, the discussion devolved into a debate into whether it was better to live in a government or an unaffiliated

town, not giving Zac much more pertinent information.

“I know a few people who might live here. How do I know if they got arrested?” Zac asked, trying to steer the conversation into a better direction.

“Well, there’s a list at the town square. They’re making a production of the whole thing,” a man answered with a shrug.

Zac forced himself to stay a bit longer before he stood up and rushed to the town square. In front of a statue in the middle of the square, a huge signpost was erected, and there was a group of people standing in front of it.

Zac pushed himself to the front and saw it was a printed list of names and the crimes they had committed. His heart started to pound faster and faster as he scoured the list name by name.

A chaotic jumble of emotions exploded in his mind when suddenly he saw his sister’s name on the list. Her name being present meant that she was still alive. The largest worry in Zac’s heart since Greenworth was that she’d already perished in the Dead Zone.

But she had survived after all. That she had been apprehended as a criminal by the New World Government wasn’t great, but it was far preferable to being dead. This situation was something he could deal with, either through diplomacy or violence.

The fact that she was on trial for attempted murder didn’t matter to Zac. As he saw it, she either was innocent or she wasn’t. If she was innocent, he’d save her. If not, he was sure Kenzie had a good reason. These times were brutal, especially to a young girl. Depending on what had happened, he might help her finish the job.

Since he knew what was going on, he simply needed to find the prisoners and take it from there. However, an hour later, he sat down on a park bench with a frown, unsure what to do next. The government had hidden away those who would stand trial, and no one knew where they were being kept.

Most believed they weren't even in Kingsbury, but teleported in through the newly added teleporter in order to avoid a prison break. That meant that Zac couldn't simply bust her out, even if he wanted to.

Furthermore, he didn't dare walk up to the government's office to demand to see her. It might backfire, resulting in her disappearing out of reach forever.

According to the sign in the square, there were two days until the time of Kenzie's trial, and Zac decided to simply wait until that time. He found a place to stay during the wait, and simply sat down in his room, trying to figure out his next move.

As he sat there, the relief of finding out his sister was alive was slowly being replaced by a feeling of helplessness and worry. Who knew what was happening to his sister while he sat and waited.

Until now, he'd blocked out any and all speculations about the fact that something might have happened to her, but it wasn't possible any longer, as he was so close now.

Various thoughts or worst-case scenarios kept whirling in his head, and the worry started to change into something more primal.

It was slowly turning into anger, a wave of burning anger that threatened to set the whole town ablaze.





## TRIAL

A pang of hunger woke Mackenzie up, though she would have preferred to stay asleep. She hurt all over from the beating yesterday. These government workers were lunatics. One of them simply walked into her cell and started swinging at her until he had been forcefully dragged away. If she hadn't been taught to minimize the damage taken, she might have actually died then and there.

She really started to believe the rumors that her brother was on the outs with them. She slowly sat up with a groan and closed her eyes to meditate, as it helped block out the pain and the depressing surroundings a bit.

“What did they do to you?” an angered voice suddenly said outside the cells, and Kenzie's heartbeat sped up when she recognized the voice.

“They finally caught you as well? Good riddance,” she said with disgust as she balefully glared at the obese old man outside the bars.

“I told them you belong to me, yet they damaged you like this?” the old man continued, ignoring Kenzie's remark. “Someone will pay for damaging my property.”

“What do you even want with me? Everyone already knows that little thing of yours doesn't work,” she said with ridicule.

“You little slut,” Harold growled, anger smoldering in his eyes. “Just wait until this farce is over. The government

judicators won't stay here for long. Then you'll know punishment."

She threw the disgusting old man a disdainful glance before she once again looked away.

"I'm stuck here now, but sooner or later, you will be the one judged," she retorted.

The old man guffawed, making his chins jiggle. Kenzie couldn't believe that there actually were a few women her age that went to him willingly just for protection. She'd rather eat zombie meat than go that far.

"This new world loves the strong. The government doesn't care about Kingsbury. They care about the power of the council and mainly me. They'll look the other way if I take home a girl or two because they need our strength for the fight against the invasions. You're just a dime a dozen, no value. I'll be just fine."

Kenzie wanted to retort something but knew there was no point. What Harold said was true. She knew that some of these trials were just for show. If the government really cared about justice, they would have locked up Harold long ago. Yet he was fine, even able to come and go at this prison just to taunt her and Lyla.

Still, she knew judgment was coming for Harold. Zac was still out there, hopefully looking for her. She just hoped he would arrive sooner than later.

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Finally, after having calmed down after a while, Zac started to plan his next move. There was no point in letting anger take over, at least not yet. He also wasn't ready to just sit around for two days doing nothing.

The first thing he did was to take out the corpse of the undead lord along with his Cosmos Sack. There honestly wasn't much remaining of the man, as the huge wooden hand had completely destroyed his body. Zac had taken the corpse

in case there was some good gear to salvage, but there simply was nothing that was still intact.

With some disappointment, he threw the corpse back into the sack, instead focusing on the pouch of the undead. Zac knew the man should be rich, but the wealth inside made even Zac's eyes widen. The Undead Empire really was on another level.

The most promising sight was a mountain of Nexus Crystals, even eclipsing the ones he'd found in Rydel's pouch. However, Zac quickly realized something was off with the crystals. They held a tinge of turquoise rather than the normal white sheen.

He quickly took one out and was surprised that it actually contained pure Miasma rather than Cosmic Energy. Zac then figured out there was nothing odd about it, as the undead couldn't cultivate using normal crystals.

If Zac had to guess, there had to be at least a hundred thousand crystals in the pouch, neatly stacked. Even better, there were actually over a hundred crystals that held a far stronger sheen. Since he'd used E-grade crystals before, it didn't take long for him to realize that these were E-grade Miasma Crystals.

At first, Zac felt he had been handed a mountain of garbage, but soon realized that these crystals might be just what he needed if he wanted to keep growing his core. Just because he had reached equilibrium didn't mean the core was completely formed.

However, he still didn't have any source that could complement these death-attuned crystals. The energy left in the seed was limited, and he didn't want to completely exhaust it.

Since there were crystals that contained miasmatic energies, perhaps there were ones containing life-attuned energy as well. Zac would have to check with Calrin when he went back to the island later.

There were all kinds of things apart from the crystals. Zac found a whole arsenal of what could only be torture devices, and there were also quite a few books and crystals containing information. There were also various gadgets and tools, though most didn't seem very useful to Zac.

Zac actually had problems getting many of the tools to work as he tested them one by one, and he assumed that it was because they required death-attuned energy to use. While Zac had a lot of it in his core, he still wasn't able to harness that power, so he eventually put the tools back one by one with some helplessness.

However, a few of the items ran on normal energy rather than Miasma. Perhaps they were trinkets the undead gave to living servants, or just spoils of war. One bracelet in particular seemed quite useful, as it could create a sturdy shield around the wearer.

It needed to be socketed with a crystal, but its effect was quite strong when augmented with one's personal Cosmic Energy. It wouldn't stop people like Zac, but it should be strong enough to ward off bullets until it ran out of energy.

It wasn't really useful to him with his endurance and defensive skill, but for people without any good skills to protect themselves, it would be quite handy.

There were also quite a few weapons, though almost all of them held uncomfortable sinister energy, especially the bone scythe that likely was the Corpselord's main weapon. It was extremely durable, but Zac was loath to give it to someone, afraid it would corrupt them.

As for the various notepads, books, and information crystals, there was nothing much of use to Zac at the moment. There likely was valuable knowledge inside, but it was all in a script that Zac didn't recognize.

He knew that the undead possessed their private language, and all the text was in that script. Even the crystals didn't contain a translation function. While the **[Book of Babel]** skill could translate speech quite well, there were severe limitations

to written text, so Zac would have to get it all translated somehow before researching the contents.

Over the next two days, Zac went around Kingsbury to piece together the situation bit by bit. The government had arrived at the town roughly two weeks ago, and after just a short meeting with the ruling council, it was announced that the town of Kingsbury would integrate into the New World Government.

This was good news to Zac, as the town had been integrated almost at the same time as the auction was held, which meant that the government's presence likely wasn't a direct result of his actions over in New Washington.

The proclamation had generally been met with a positive attitude, as life was tough this close to the incursion. The hope was that the government would provide food and security, both of which were currently lacking in the area. There were a few grumbles amongst the zombie hunters, though, as they had grown accustomed to the Wild West-like lifestyle close to the Dead Zone.

However, there were rumors of large-scale movements in the Dead Zone, and many felt a storm was brewing on the horizon. Zac silently agreed after having witnessed the events in the incursion as well.

The undead were starting to organize. Zac didn't know when they would explode into action, but it didn't feel like they would wait until the leaders got their limiters removed and advanced to E-grade. The presence of a teleporter with access to multiple government towns was a lifeline for the citizens in case something happened.

The subsequent events were met with a far more tepid response, though. Great chaos erupted during a night, with two of the four councilors mysteriously dying. It was generally believed that they were against the integration with the government, though people talked in hushed tones about the matter.

As soon as the two leaders died, multiple places were raided, one person after another being captured. There had

been quite a few deaths and a lot of destruction, as some wouldn't let themselves get captured without a fight. The government said they were capturing all criminals in the town to improve safety.

For the most part, they were right. Quite a few bad apples had been rounded up, both cultivators and mortals. There were gangsters, murderers, and rapists who got captured or killed one after another. Streets that were extremely dangerous to walk before became safe overnight.

However, many got arrested for no apparent reason, and the only charge given was "threatening security." A theory that Zac only learned of by listening in on a conversation between two drunk patrons was that many of those who got captured arbitrarily either were cultivators from Greenworth or leaders of hunting parties.

The men who spoke about the matter concluded that the government was trying to pilfer the riches of successful cultivators and zombie hunters to pay for the expansion, but Zac had another guess. People from Greenworth might have been caught in order to find out more about him and his sister.

As for Kenzie, Zac learned the charge of attempted murder was likely real. Zac almost went on a rampage when he learned about one of the councilors called Harold. It looked like the one Kenzie had attacked was this very man, but her power wasn't enough, so she'd failed.

It wasn't very hard to find out that information, as Harold's actions were well known in the city. The night the councilors died, two women who worked under one of the killed councilors were seen fighting against Harold in the middle of the streets.

Some said they fought because the two wanted revenge for their killed leader; others said that they tried to escape capture.

The more Zac learned about the man, the angrier he got. The old pig was the same as the leaders of Greenworth. The only reason that old man hadn't been turned into mangled clumps of flesh yet was simply that Zac couldn't find him,

even after breaking into his mansion with the help of **[Thousand Faces]**.

Zac still hadn't figured out whether this all was an elaborate trap for himself, or whether it was just an odd coincidence, even after two days of sleuthing. He had tried searching for any hidden forces or weaponry while he waited but couldn't find anything. If the government was planning something, they were keeping it close to their vest.

Of course, that wasn't to say that he didn't have a few aces up his sleeve. While he didn't find Harold in his mansion, he did find the Nexus Node for Kingsbury. That gave him a few options that might come in handy, depending on how things played out.

But the only real solution for the situation he could find was to stay put in his disguise as long as possible, trying to find out any clues by observing the trial. He'd only move when he knew what was going on. He still had a small hope that the government would do the right thing and mete out proper justice. If the whole town knew Harold was guilty, then so should they.

Zac sat on the bleachers of a stadium, looking down at the spectacle on the field. The government had refitted a small arena into a courtroom and even allowed the public to spectate.

It appeared that the government wanted to show both their prowess and that the rule of law existed even in their frontier towns. Of course, Zac was also very aware that this might all be an elaborate trap for himself.

Zac suddenly sensed a weak disturbance in the energy beneath the stadium and looked down with a small smile. The teleportation array was actually placed right beneath the arena somewhere. It made things quite simple.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, a group of government officials entered the field from a side door and took a seat at the judge's table. Zac scrutinized each and every one of them, but he couldn't recognize any of them from his visits to New Washington.

At the same time, a few other people entered the stadium, and Zac's pupils narrowed when he saw a fat man in his sixties in the front of the group. Zac was sure it was Harold, the most likely suspect for the untimely deaths of the other two councilors. And more importantly, the likely culprit behind Kenzie's apprehension.

It took all of Zac's self-control to not go over right then and there, as it would mess up his rescue. However, all self-control was quickly crumbling when he saw the state of the prisoners as they were led out in a long line. He completely exploded in rage when he saw his sister walk in with a limp, dressed in rags, with a black eye and her hair in grimy stripes.

Today, heads would roll.





## REUNION

Zac's plan to adopt a wait-and-see approach was completely thrown into the back of his mind and was quickly being replaced with far more violent solutions. The stands around Zac started to ominously creak as the air around him distorted, prompting those around him to move away with fear in their eyes.

Zac was unable to control his rage after seeing his brutalized sister. The seat he sat in exploded into splinters as Zac pushed forward, catapulting himself down to the field.

"Hey! You can't go down here!" one of the guards standing along the stands shouted as the whole squad pointed their guns at Zac.

Zac only threw a glance at them as his aura rolled out like a tidal wave, drowning the guards in it. His aura was now empowered by his Dao of Heaviness, which didn't only empower it, but also allowed him to control its spread.

The huge discrepancy in power between Zac and the guards and the empowerment of the Dao had turned his aura into a proper attack, though it wasn't a skill. The eyes of the guards quickly rolled up in their heads as they slumped down on the ground, unconscious.

Chaos erupted on the stands, and a group of guards came running into the arena, but Zac didn't care. He activated **[Loamwalker]**, and with two instantaneous steps, he found himself standing in front of Kenzie, and a storm of emerald leaves started to whirl around the two.

A few soldiers with hair-trigger temperaments fired a few shots at the storm of leaves, but they were immediately neutralized. Furthermore, every attack was met with a stone ripping through the air and turning into a deadly projectile, instantly killing people. In seconds, no one dared to attack, and instead turned to their superiors for orders.

Zac's eyes reddened as he looked down at the marred face of his little sister, but he knew he couldn't relax just yet. Mackenzie opened her mouth to speak, but with lightning speed, he pushed a few pieces of Springroot into her mouth.

She swallowed the herbs with surprise, and Zac scoured her face and mannerisms for anything off as he used his observation skill on her. His sister's appearance had thoroughly pissed him off, but he had to make sure this wasn't another situation like the one with Janos.

**[Mackenzie Atwood – Human. Level 33 – XXXXX]**

Zac's brows lifted in surprise, both at her level and at the fact that the line showcasing her highest attribute was blocked. Very few people were able to block that attribute from his tests back in Port Atwood, and it likely meant that her Intelligence or Wisdom attributes should be quite high.

Between the fact that she was fine after swallowing the root and the skill, he was mostly satisfied, but he needed to make sure.

“Who are you? What did you feed me?” she hesitantly asked, but was unable to back away due to the leaves whirling around the two. “You need to leave. The guards are coming.”

Zac quickly looked back at the guards, who surrounded the two with their guns at the ready, but he didn't care. He was pushing his **[Nature's Barrier]** skill to the limit, and unless powerhouses like the Corpselord showed up, they could forget about getting through in the short run.

“I'm sorry I'm late,” Zac said with sad eyes as he tousled her hair like he'd done so many times before.

“Zac?” she hesitantly asked, likely having trouble reconciling the familiar voice with the unfamiliar face.

Zac only nodded, and two tears quickly pooled in Mackenzie's eyes, and she moved forward to hug him. However, she was held at a distance by Zac's arm, and she looked at him once again with confusion in her eyes.

"What did you draw on the wall beneath my bed when you were four years old?"

"What?" Mackenzie couldn't help blurting out. "Never mind that. We need to run."

As if collaborating with that statement, a huge slam shook the judge's table as the judge, a somber woman in her fifties, stood up.

"You are encroaching on a government trial, flaunting the rule of law. Are you making yourself an enemy of the New World Government?"

Zac barely spared the judge a glance, keeping his focus on Mackenzie.

"Perhaps I am, perhaps I'm not. My comings and goings are none of your concern. If you have a problem, you can report it to Thomas Fisher," Zac tersely responded.

Loud murmurs erupted in the stands, and the judge looked enraged. However, Zac ignored all that and refocused on his sister, his eyes slowly hardening. "Answer the question."

Mackenzie seemed to suddenly have understood something and quickly responded, "A talking poop," she said with a slight blush.

Zac slightly smiled and nodded as he followed up with a few more questions. Kenzie quickly answered them as she got more and more nervous, her head darting around at the troops that were amassing around them.

Zac felt it might be time to finish up as well, and finished with one last question. "When did Mom die?"

"Mom isn't dead! She's missing!" she angrily retorted as if by reflex, her head snapping back toward Zac with an angry scowl.

Zac was finally satisfied, and with a deft movement, put the defensive bracelet on Kenzie's arm.

"This is a defensive item that can protect you for a bit," he quickly explained.

"What are you going to do?" she nervously asked. "We're completely surrounded."

"Well, that's up to them," Zac said with a shrug as he turned back to the enraged judge as he stepped forward, his face turning back to normal.

"I am Zachary Atwood, also known as Super Brother-Man," he said, completely unleashing his aura.

Shouts erupted in the stadium, and multiple guards fell over or backed away from the billowing power Zac emitted. Frowns of anger or worry could be seen on the government officials, and they seemed unsure what to do.

"I am taking my sister with me away from here," Zac said, disappearing in the next second.

The guards barely had time to react before Zac was back again, this time holding a squealing Harold by his neck. The old man was desperately trying to get free, his face quickly turning red.

Zac wasn't planning on doing anything to the old man just yet, but he'd seen him trying to slink away through an emergency exit during the commotion. He couldn't let that man get away after what he'd found out about him during the past two days.

"Let me go! I am the mayor of Kingsbury," Harold wheezed out as he pleadingly looked at the judge, who seemed to have found her bearing once again.

"Everywhere I go, I find that the justice and rule of law the New World Government rattles on about is relative. The rich and powerful can do whatever they want, no matter how disgusting or morally corrupt, all while the government looks the other way," Zac said as he threw Harold down on the ground, stomping down on one of his legs.

A sickening crunch erupted as the old man screamed in pain, unable or afraid to get back up again. He only tried to slowly crawl away from Zac toward the judge's table.

"I've only been in the area for a short time, yet it has been impossible for me to not learn about Harold's crimes against humanity. Yet he doesn't stand shackled to be judged, but rather gets a promotion from you people. I'll give you one chance to set things right," Zac said, giving the judge an even stare.

"We are aware of the reports but have found them unsubstantiated. While many women live at Mayor Harold's residence, they have willingly moved there. We have ascertained that after an exhaustive round of interviews. The government works by facts, not by malignant rumors. Since the government doesn't yet have a stance on polygamy, Mayor Harold has committed no crime," the judge answered tersely.

Snickers and murmurs erupted on the stands, and even a few of the braver souls booed at the judge until a few of the soldiers turned their attention to the troublemakers. Zac only shook his head in disappointment. He had a strong feeling this would happen, but it was still a letdown.

"Your government still hasn't closed a single incursion, but you have time to shield scum like this pile of garbage. You are truly disappointing," Zac said as reality cracked like a mirror above him.

The gargantuan hand wrought out of wood emerged as it had a few times before, radiating power and finality. Shouts could be heard from all over as both soldiers and spectators looked at the skill with horror, hurriedly moving away from it.

"Stop him!" the judge frantically shouted, her strict demeanor blown away by the terrifying power the hand emitted.

Various attacks pelted the hand, both guns and skills of magical nature. However, the attacks were as ants trying to bite an elephant to death, and the hand was barely affected. Zac simply held his hand outward and swung it down as he gave Harold a look devoid of emotion.

“No!” the old man shouted as Cosmic Energy gathered around him.

However, it was to no avail as the hand slammed down into the ground like slapping a mosquito. The slam created a huge shockwave that blew most of the soldiers off their feet, and even the spectators in the stands had to take cover.

The attack contained almost boundless force, as this time, the hand wasn't imbued with the Dao of Trees, but rather the Dao of Heaviness. The whole stadium shook as an enormous rumble was heard. The hand soon disappeared, leaving only a crater that made it look like a meteor had slammed right into the stadium floor.

As for the old mayor, there was not one piece of him remaining intact since the slam had completely disintegrated him. At least Zac could tell the man had died, due to the surge of Cosmic Energy entering his body.

Zac surveyed the destruction wrought by **[Nature's Punishment]**, satisfied with the result. He didn't only do it for shock and awe, but also to destroy any subterranean levels of the stadium. The government had tried to be sneaky by placing the teleportation array somewhere hidden in the underground levels beneath the stadium, perhaps to be able to bring quick reinforcements.

However, they likely hadn't expected the level of damage he could bring with a single attack. The force between **[Nature's Punishment]** and the Dao of Heaviness was even above Zac's expectations. It would likely take hours to dig out the array, stopping any reinforcements from interfering.

Apart from the mayor, everyone was largely fine except for some broken bones and scrapes. The soldiers were scrambling to their feet, their eyes widely darting around until they hesitantly turned to Zac, who stood rooted like a tall tree, his robes still swinging in the winds his attack created. No one said a word, waiting with trepidation for Zac's next move.

Killing the mayor had alleviated much of Zac's fury, and he felt there was no need to keep the killing going. He knew that most of these soldiers were just normal people following

orders. They weren't aware of the shady dealings of the people at the top, or of the threat of the shape-shifters.

He was just about to announce he was leaving, when an extreme sense of unease filled his heart, and he unhesitantly reactivated his defensive skill as he quickly looked around for any threat. An extremely loud gunshot that was extremely familiar to Zac could suddenly be heard from the other side of the stadium.

Zac almost instinctively activated his defensive shield on his gear, but his brows rose in horror when he realized that he wasn't the recipient of the attack. He immediately activated **[Loamwalker]** to get back to his sister's side, but it was too late.

The bullet from the sniper rifle slammed into the shield from the bracelet, and the shield proved insufficient as it cracked, allowing the bullet to proceed toward his sister. The brief time the shield held at least provided Mackenzie with a brief time to react, and she repositioned herself with surprising speed.

However, she didn't have time to completely dodge the attack, and the bullet slammed into her shoulder with much of its power remaining. A fountain of blood erupted from the wound, and she fell together with a wail.

The next instant, Zac flashed in front of his sister, rage filling his face. His axe was already in mid-swing, and as the edge ripped through the air, a gigantic blade formed upon it. The fractal edge grew to ten meters in an instant, and it flew toward the area the sound came from with the speed of a missile.

The attack completely destroyed a large section of the arena, blowing a hole in the ceiling. In a hidden alcove in the corner, a man suddenly fell down with a scream, a huge sniper rifle falling with him. The man was bleeding profusely, the huge blade likely having at least partly hit him.

The wound seemed fatal, but there was still no surge of energy after the man slammed into the ground with a wet thud.



Since he looked largely incapacitated, Zac instead bent down to his wounded sister.

“Ouch, that hurts,” she said with a groan, but Zac was relieved to see that the wound wasn’t too bad.

It looked like the bullet had punched straight through, and while it bled profusely, it would likely heal quickly with some help. He quickly fed Kenzie one of his strongest healing pills as he replaced the crystal in the defensive bracelet before he once again focused on the man, with murder in his eyes.

A few of the soldiers hesitantly aimed their guns at him, but a look from Zac quickly quashed any thoughts of resistance from the others.

“That man is not from the government!” the judge quickly shouted, perhaps afraid that they would be implicated by his actions.

Zac only snorted and flashed over to the dying man’s side, his axe at the ready. Something was off with this assailant, and Zac’s gut told him it was a shape-shifter trying to sow discord between himself and the government. He wanted to expose his identity to the world, which hopefully would be a wake-up call for everyone.

“For the Red,” the man coughed with hatred in his eyes as he looked up at Zac, and Cosmic Energy gathered in his body.

Zac knew what those gathering energies meant and realized his plan was for naught, so he unhesitantly moved to destroy the shape-shifter’s head before he could explode. However, his axe hit nothing as the man disintegrated into a pool of goop. However, Zac knew something was wrong when he didn’t gain any Cosmic Energy. He looked back at his sister and found a bloody monstrosity had re-formed closer to his sister.

It looked like a skinned human that had been left to bloat in the sun for weeks, and Cosmic Energy churned around it in ominous ways.

“Run!” was all Zac had time to shout as he tried to get back, but it was too late as the monster exploded, golden

flames blanketing the whole arena.



## RETURN

A wave of golden flames pushed toward Zac, who unhesitatingly activated the shield of his robes as he punched through the fire. He was full of remorse for his lapse in judgment, leaving his sister alone like that. He'd thought the sniper was out of commission, but clearly, he was wrong. Besides, he really hadn't expected them to try to kill his sister, as it made no sense. Leverage her as a hostage, perhaps. But not this.

The scale of the explosion was far beyond that of the demons when they chose to kill themselves. He knew that the power of the bracelet was nowhere strong enough to withstand the power of that blast at such close proximity. He prayed that she had at least a breath of life left, which would let him do something about it.

In no time, he found himself back at Kenzie's side, his heart beating like a drum. When he arrived at the center of the blast, everything was in ruins. Burning pieces of flesh were strewn around, as everyone within at least five meters was dead without a doubt.

However, Zac breathed out in relief, as there was one clear exception to the carnage. Kenzie was lying unconscious on the ground, completely unscathed apart from her earlier wound. Surrounding her was a blue shield that looked like a glass cube. A small blue light was hovering within the cube a few feet above his sister, and it was clear from the rays it emitted that it was the source of the protective shield.

What made Zac confused was that he couldn't feel a trace of Cosmic Energy from the shield. All skills and defensive gear emitted energy signals, but the odd thing above Kenzie might as well be a normal stone from the energy it emitted. Zac looked down at his unconscious sister, wondering what sort of opportunity she'd run into to attain such a wondrous thing.

The next problem was how to get to her. He walked toward the shield and touched it, but it was completely solid. Even when he started to exert quite some force, it didn't budge in the slightest. The defensive power was clearly excellent, likely even above that of his own robes, and he was starting to worry that he wouldn't be able to get her out.

Suddenly a red light flashed in the hovering ball above Kenzie, and a red beam hit Zac straight in his chest. Zac quickly moved back as he moved his axe to block the light, but he quickly realized the beam was harmless. Zac stopped and confusedly looked at the small ball, only to see it fly down and enter the head of his sister.

A few seconds later, the shield flashed out of existence, and Zac ran over to his sister, who woke up with a groan.

"What happened?" she asked with some confusion as Zac helped her up.

"The guy who attacked you blew himself up. You were saved by a weird ball shielding you," Zac said.

"Uh, okay," she answered with a troubled face, not meeting his eyes.

Zac frowned, but this wasn't the time to ask what was going on. She clearly knew what he meant, but the issue didn't seem simple. Judging from her reaction, it might be a big secret, so he was thankful that the thick smoke from the fires had covered the whole area.

The magical fire soon died down, and the smoke covering the area was blown away by the wind. Zac looked around at the destruction with a grimace. There were unmoving bodies everywhere, even up on the stands. Even more were nursing

various degrees of burns, and cries and groans could be heard from every direction.

From a quick glance, at least 10% of the people in the arena had been killed by the desperate attack by the sniper, most of them civilians. It made Zac sick to his stomach, but now wasn't the time to mourn.

The government was quickly trying to aid those in need, seemingly having the situation under control. Zac thought about helping out, but he didn't dare leave his sister's side again. Instead, he threw a bottle of pills over to the judge, who caught it hesitantly.

The judge, whose hair was in disarray and covered in soot, understood what was inside and immediately passed pills to soldiers and civilians as she shouted orders until the situation was starting to calm down.

More and more people looked over at Zac with some trepidation, unsure what would happen next. Someone had tried to murder the sister of the strongest man in the world right at a government trial. Who knew how he would react. Zac somewhat understood what was going on, and spoke up with a loud voice covering the arena.

"I know that the New World Government wasn't behind this attack and that the man who blew himself up wasn't part of your organization. Certain forces want to create a conflict between me and you, but I am not the enemy of the New World Government. I am done with Kingsbury. If anyone has a problem with what happened, they are welcome to go to Port Atwood," Zac said.

"I will also warn everyone. Shape-shifters walk amongst us. One of the most powerful incursions on Earth has sent out thousands of spies who can take anyone's form. It is almost impossible to distinguish them from humans. We believe they are behind various events that have led to high Rankers perishing, and they have infiltrated many major forces already," he continued.

"And I believe that the attack we just suffered was one of them as well. The golden flames are the calling card of the

Church of Everlasting Dao, the force with the shape-shifters.”

The people in the arena looked skeptically at each other, and Zac felt some helplessness when he saw their reaction. He had to get the message out, but after that, everything was up to these people. Hopefully, they'd heed his warnings and help spread the word.

“Their goal is to splinter humanity so that they can pick us off one by one, and we cannot allow that to happen. However, there is a solution. There is a cheap herb available in the General Stores called Springroot. It is harmless to humans, but to these shape-shifters, it's a deadly poison. That is the only method my force has found to identify them. Everyone should carry some with them in order to expose these things, and hopefully, we can stop them that way.”

With that, Zac felt he was done. The multiple scares where he thought he'd lost his sister just as he found her had left him rattled, and he just wanted to get out of here before something unexpected happened again.

The government officials seemed only too happy to see the humanoid monster gone as well, and let him go without making a fuss. Kenzie was quite weak since she woke up, so Zac had her climb up on his back. He would normally have carried her but wanted his arms free in case of another attack.

“Wait, we need to get Lyla. She was in prison with me. I saw she was taken here as well before it got crazy,” Kenzie weakly said as she looked around.

“Um,” Zac coughed as he looked at the charred body parts around him.

“She was at the edge of the prisoners over there. She may be fine. Hurry,” she said as she pulled his robe.

Zac only shook his head and walked over to where she pointed. He had a hard time believing that any of the prisoners were alive. From how it looked, the government didn't have any means to block the Cosmic Energy of the prisoners, but even he wouldn't be unscathed that close to the blast unless he used some of his defensive means.

However, to his surprise, Kenzie pointed out a girl lying unconscious close to the edge of the field. Her clothes were in tatters, and she was unconscious, but she was clearly alive. She'd actually reacted much in the same way as he had when faced with a suicide bomber long ago, as a burned carcass was draped above her for protection.

Zac pushed the corpse away and poured some water on the face of the girl. With a few sputters, she woke up, wildly looking around. She didn't have time to react before Zac pushed some Springroot into her mouth, making her cough. Kenzie frowned and lightly slapped him on his head when she saw the treatment of her friend.

"Can't you be gentler?" she asked unhappily as she glared at Zac.

"I needed to make sure. I don't want to get stabbed again," Zac answered with a shrug as he observed the girl's response.

After noticing she was fine, he also took out a healing pill, though one of a lower grade, and gave it to the girl, who hesitantly accepted it.

"It's a healing pill," Zac only said as he helped the girl to his feet.

Kenzie, who was still hanging on the back of Zac, smiled at Lyla.

"This is Zac, my big brother. He's Super Brother-Man," she said happily. "I'm leaving this town. Come with me."

"Your brother is the number one Ranker and you never mentioned it?" she said with a wry face as she swallowed the pill. "Where are you going?"

Kenzie opened her mouth, but no words came out as she realized she didn't know.

"Port Atwood, my town," Zac said, realizing it seemed he had to take another person with him. "You should know, if you come with me, you might not be able to get to a government town in a long while. My relationship with them is... complicated."



“Okay. I don’t want to stay here anyway. What if they come for me again? Harold is probably only going to be replaced with another asshole,” she muttered as she started to walk toward the exit.

“Are we in a hurry?” Kenzie suddenly asked.

“Well, not really. They won’t be able to use their teleportation array for an hour at least. Why?” Zac asked as he followed the girl out of the arena.

He took one last look around at the people in the stands and the government official, most of whom were silently staring back at him. He really didn’t know what he could or should do in this situation. This new life of his was just too tiring with its endless duties and expectations.

“There are some things I want to get before we go,” Kenzie said, breaking his train of thought.

“I went to your home and picked up your clothes and stuff like that,” Zac said.

It was true; he’d gone over to Kenzie’s place during the two days he waited, making sure looters didn’t steal anything important.

“Really?” she asked with a smile. “But I’m not talking about that. Lyla and I hid a few things in a stash in case something happened.”

Soon they found themselves in an abandoned house at the edge of town, and after being prompted, Zac moved a bookshelf, showing a hidden entrance.

“We created this place when Harold was starting to become a nuisance, in case we needed to make a quick escape. We figured we could sneak back and get our things during the night or something,” Mackenzie explained as Zac looked down into the dark cellar.

Since it was pitch black, Zac took out a lantern powered by Cosmic Energy that gave off a warm light. He gingerly walked down the stairs, ready for any type of assault in case someone had found the stash. Even his defensive skill was activated around the two of them once again, just in case.

However, it was completely empty down there, allowing Zac to finally relax. The cellar was pretty small, but it was well organized with two small cots and a few shelves of gear and provisions.

It seemed the two did not own a Cosmos Sack, so he threw one over to his sister, who had jumped down from his back.

“I wish I could take a bath. I am completely sticky,” she muttered as she packed her belongings into her new pouch.

To both the girls’ surprise, Zac simply took out a large barrel along with a canteen that held enough water to fill it up.

“It’s cold but clean. Make it quick. We need to leave soon,” he said.

He’d made sure that there was no one following him, but he couldn’t be sure. They couldn’t waste too much time down here.

“Well, you wanna watch, you perv?” Mackenzie said with a roll of her eyes. “Go wait upstairs. It’s the only entrance, so we’ll be fine.”

After some hesitation, Zac acquiesced, walking toward the stairs again, but before he got up, two arms embraced him from behind.

“I knew you’d come,” Mackenzie murmured with a low voice.

“Of course, I’m Super Brother-Man, after all.” Zac smiled as he walked up the stairs.

Soon he heard splashing and subdued talk downstairs, so Zac simply took out a chair and sat down with a sigh. His heart was finally calm, far calmer than it had been in a long, long time.

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“Report, my child,” the voice on the other side of the communication crystal said after the static died down.

“Super Brother-Man showed up as we guessed, Father. Unfortunately, it did not go as planned. The sniper failed to kill the sister,” the acolyte Terzun answered.

“So the mission failed?” the voice said with some displeasure.

“It is unclear. The Sovereign-select still killed the newly appointed mayor, and quite a few people perished when the sacrifice used [**The Ultimate Sacrifice**]. The target did not, however, conquer the town, and instead left soon after. I believe he’s heading either toward the sect inside the Undead Empire or another town.”

“Very well. It’s an acceptable result. The sacrifice was simply a local forcefully injected with the Purity of the Boundless Heavens. He would soon expire in any case,” the priest said.

“Our resources are quite limited so far from our own incursion. We will fan the flames from our side. Clean things up on your end; make sure all mentions of the sister’s name is absent from all reports. Otherwise, it will be hard to explain it as simple incompetence,” the voice continued after a brief pause.

“Did the government’s plan fail as well?”

“No, I made sure to plant a spy next to the Sovereign-select as well,” Terzun quickly answered.

“Good. Try to find out the next move of the Sovereign-select. Report to me if he returns. But remember, this isn’t your true mission. Keep monitoring the unholy beings; they are our real enemy.”

“I understand...” Terzun said with some hesitation in his voice.

“What?”

“With respect, Father, is all this subterfuge really necessary? Why aren’t we simply purifying these humans? None of the human empires has claimed this planet, and while the Sovereign-select showed great power, he is not a match for the High Vicar.”

Only silence came from the crystals, making Terzun believe the priest on the other side had disconnected, but after a while, he spoke up again.

“Something is odd about this planet. The bishops want to understand what’s going on before we start the great purge.”

*Something odd?* Terzun thought with confusion. Since when did the Church of the Everlasting Dao care about such things?



## HATCHETMAN'S RAGE

As Zac drove the car through the Dead Zone, Kenzie told him much about what had happened to her during the six months since they last saw each other. As for Zac, he was a bit hesitant to speak about his experiences, as there were two others in the car.

Lyla was obviously one of them, but before they left, Kenzie had been approached by one more person. The other girl was Olivia, and he actually somewhat recognized her. She was one of Kenzie's old friends, and he had met her a few times before the fall. Apparently, the two only found each other again a month ago, and Kenzie had invited her as well to Port Atwood.

Her story was pretty impressive, as she'd done something similar to himself. It turned out Olivia had been traveling just like him when the fall happened, and she got randomized to a town a month's travel away from Kingsbury. Just like Emily and her parents did, Olivia almost immediately set out on a journey to find her way home until she heard about the cultivators in Kingsbury.

Unfortunately, none of her family were cultivators, so they were likely either back at Greenworth or wherever the other parts of the city had ended up. Since she met Kenzie, she'd decided to stay put for the time being. Zac was a bit surprised she tagged along, as it would likely have been easier to get back to Greenworth if she'd stayed in the town.

Then again, he realized it might be his fault, as anyone even slightly related to him might get into trouble as a result of

his actions. Perhaps he could send her back with Julia later, so Olivia could hopefully find her way back to her family.

Kenzie clearly trusted them, but Zac had learned to be cautious, so he spoke very little about what he'd been through. He only explained that he'd found himself on an island and through a lot of battle had managed to create a town.

The two in the back seat seemed a bit wary of him still, and he couldn't blame them after his display yesterday. They mostly sat quietly in the back seat, only responding when talked to.

It took two days until they got back to Mount Everlasting Peace, and Zac was relieved to see that nothing had changed since he was here a week ago. He had been afraid that an undead attack was imminent due to the movements he saw, but the monastery was as tranquil as usual.

As they arrived, the same old monk who led him up the stairs the last time walked forward.

"Amitabha, patron. The abbot sends his regards," the old man said, placing his hands together.

"Greetings, venerable," Zac said with a small bow as he put his car into a Cosmos Sack.

He had been a bit embarrassed, as he hadn't known how to address the monks in his earlier visit, so he'd also looked it up while he waited for the trial to start. There were still a lot of things he didn't know about Buddhist conduct, but at least he shouldn't disrespect the monks by mistake.

"I guess patron wishes to use the teleportation array?"

"Yes," Zac said. "I am staying here for a while, though."

"You're not coming with us?" Kenzie asked with some confusion.

"Not just yet. I need to head into the Dead Zone for a few days," Zac answered.

This was something he'd decided on earlier. There really wasn't much for him to do back home in Port Atwood. His next goal was the sovereignty quest, but there were a few

weeks left before its time limit was up, and it was the same with the Treasure Hunt.

Since Kenzie was safe, he could finally breathe easily, but it also meant he needed to look forward. He was currently only one level from level 60, which hopefully would provide him with a skill that would increase his overall power.

Besides, he hoped he could cull the numbers of the undead horde a bit, which hopefully would give the monks more time to prepare themselves. It was the least he could do for how much they had helped him.

He wasn't comfortable with taking the three with him, since he was heading toward the core, and who knew what would happen. Now that his wound was healed and his bead was under control, he felt much more confident and wasn't afraid to cause some havoc. He was pretty confident in his ability to keep himself alive, but the same couldn't be said for the girls.

He'd already used his inspection skill on the three as part of him making sure they were not shape-shifters, and both Kenzie and Lyla were level 33, which was quite impressive. It seemed they'd pushed themselves pretty hard since Harold had been lusting after them for months.

Olivia was almost as powerful, reaching level 32 without having access to an incursion for a long time. Those who traveled were constantly put in harm's way, so it wasn't too surprising that they'd gained power quickly.

"Oh, and I brought a lot of Springroot as well. You should have everyone coming to your monastery eat this. It is not dangerous to humans, but to certain invaders, it's deadly," Zac said.

"Amitabha. Patron needs not worry about the lizard people. Their disguises cannot block the sight of the abbot, as karma is not something that can be hidden behind a transformation skill," the old monk said with a laugh. "One of them tried to infiltrate the monastery some time ago with no success."



Zac's brows rose in shock before he threw a thoughtful glance up at the mountaintop. The old abbot was truly full of mysterious means. It also meant that the abbot was only humoring him when Zac had told him about the shape-shifters earlier, as he'd already known about it.

"Give people this when you go through," Zac said as he handed his sister an envelope. "There are a lot of knowledgeable people at Port Atwood. Go find Alyn if you want to become stronger."

"You're dumping me here and immediately going on an adventure? Are you already tired of us?" Mackenzie said with a snort as she turned to the old monk. "Can you believe this guy?"

Zac only shook his head with a smile, as he knew she was just joking around. Soon he'd opened the teleporter leading to his town, and saw the three off. After saying his farewells to the old monk, he set out toward the core of the Dead Zone.

The next few days, Zac kept a frantic pace as he scouted out the inner area of the incursion. On the second day, he found a zombie horde quite similar to the one he'd gotten the quest for earlier. There were around 150,000 zombies, all stumbling toward the center like the horde before it.

It made Zac realize the horde from earlier wasn't an isolated incident. The undead were truly gathering. It filled him with some hopelessness, as there were just too many zombies in the Dead Zone. Conservatively counting, there should be at least a billion people who had been turned. Even if Zac kept swinging away for years, there would still be plenty of them to go around.

The only good news was that he still hadn't spotted a single high-tier undead, at least during the last two days, meaning they likely had receded back toward the core again. He didn't know if it was thanks to him killing the Corpse-lord, but in any case, it was good news.

Still, Zac didn't hesitate to head down and start cutting them down by the dozens. He didn't need to keep a frantic pace, since he had no time limit this time to hound him.

Therefore, he simply summoned a large fractal edge from [Chop] that he kept attached as he methodically kept swinging away.

Large amounts of energy kept entering him, and as before it was joined by large amounts of Miasma. However, Zac was happy to note that even though the bead still accepted the deathly energy, it wasn't going out of control this time.

It took far less Miasma from each zombie, and the large amounts of life-attuned energy in the core kept the balance, even though the Miasma was increasing at a steady pace. Only when roughly 60% of the core was made from deathly energy did he feel that the core started showing signs of instability.

By this point, he'd mowed down at least twenty thousand zombies, bringing him closer to the next level. However, not wanting to cause a scene again, he stopped his rampage and quickly distanced himself from the furious zombies.

When he'd created some distance, he quickly took out the seed from the lotus flower and sat down for two hours to restore balance. Only when he was back at an even split did he once again get to his feet. It wasn't difficult to find the zombie horde again, as they didn't move too quickly, and Zac once again went to work.

He repeated the process a few times until he finally sensed he'd passed the boundary and reached level 60. Not wanting to waste more time on these weak targets, he quickly distanced himself one final time and looked at his status screen.

**Name: Zachary Atwood**

**Level: 60**

**Class: [F-Rare] Hatchetman**

**Race: [E] Human**

**Alignment: [Earth] Port Atwood - Lord**

**Titles: Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being,**

**Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary  
Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor  
Noblesse, Core**

**Dao: Seed of Heaviness – Middle, Seed of Trees –  
High, Seed of Sharpness – Early**

**Strength: 329**

**Dexterity: 162**

**Endurance: 230**

**Vitality: 197**

**Intelligence: 90**

**Wisdom: 85**

**Luck: 93**

**Free Points: 3**

**Nexus Coins: 57,703,653**

As he looked at his screen, he couldn't help wondering what others would say if they found out he'd made seven million Nexus Coins from one day of grinding. Of course, it was only possible since the zombies were gathering into large clumps.

For once, Zac hoped that he could count on humanity's greed and that there were tens of thousands of zombie hunters out at the moment desperately killing zombies for the almost free money.

Zac put his three points into vitality, bringing it past two hundred as well. By now, he started to feel a bit set with that attribute, making him think of what to focus on next. He would have to talk with Ogras or Alyn about it, but perhaps it would be prudent to put some more points into his last two attributes, Intelligence and Wisdom, as both were starting to severely lag behind.

However, that wasn't what he was interested in at the moment, so instead, he quickly brought up his quest panel. He wasn't surprised there was a new quest on the screen, but he was quite surprised when he saw the progress.

**Hatchetman's Rage (Class): Earn "Butcher" Title.**

**Reward: Hatchetman's Rage skill (1/1)**

**[COMPLETE]**

Zac smiled sardonically when he saw the quest's task. Perhaps it was quite a feat for normal cultivators to kill a hundred thousand creatures, but he'd passed that number a long time ago. It was pretty clear it was an offensive skill, judging by the name of the skill and how to complete the quest. This suited Zac just fine, and he only hoped it would be good for single targets.

Since the quest was marked as complete, he only needed to get back to his Nexus Node to turn it in. With that, he closed the screens and refocused on what to do next. He knew that he hadn't really accomplished much apart from lining his own pockets, but then again, he simply couldn't find more valuable targets to kill.

He had been traveling for two days already and was some distance into the core zone. If he kept going, he was afraid he'd end up in the headquarters, facing more than he could handle at the moment.

The incursions had stabilized long ago, which meant that they had some more functions. They were able to set up certain arrays, for example, and Zac wasn't knowledgeable enough in that regard to dare get too close. The undead were extremely wealthy, and he was afraid he'd get trapped in an illusion array or something similar, becoming a sitting duck.

Since there was not much else to do, he simply turned back toward the mountain. When he finally came back to Mount Everlasting Peace, he initially wanted to say goodbye to the abbot but was disappointed to find he was in seclusion. With nothing else to do, he headed toward the teleporter.

The array was actually down at the foot of the mountain rather than up in the temple, which had surprised Zac a bit.

"I hope I'll see you all again," Zac said. "Remember, if things get out of hand here, you can always come to Port Atwood. Even if the mountain is lost, we can reclaim it."

“If heavens wills it, we will meet again, patron,” the old man said with a kind smile as the portal flashed to life.

“Here is a small offering to your temple. I hope it will be of use,” Zac said and handed over a pouch.

It contained a wide variety of pills and a large pile of Nexus Crystals. Zac hoped it would help their war efforts in case they got attacked again, at least to the point they managed to evacuate.

“Thank you, patron. The abbot is currently unavailable, but he asked me to convey a message. ‘To forgive is not to condone others’ actions, it is to bring peace to your heart.’ Safe travels, patron,” the monk said and once again put his hands together.

Zac didn’t say anything as he left with a nod, the portal flashing shut behind him.



## SECRETS

After a brief moment of darkness, Zac once again exited, but the unfamiliar sight gave him a start. It almost looked as if he were standing inside a world tree, as the walls were living trees sprouting leaves around them. However, they were far taller than the usual ones he'd seen so far, reaching for the skies. There were also a good deal of holes in the structure in strategic places, flooding the floor in natural light.

The demons had been busy, as they'd grown a structure around the array. Zac noticed the design was slightly reminiscent of how it had looked in New Washington, though the teleportation lobby was built with the signature demonic architecture.

Zac suddenly felt there was a group of eyes upon him and guessed there were defenders hidden up amongst the branches in the air. It proved there were also proper protocols in place to make sure nothing untoward happened at this important location.

He was quite happy with the transformation and full of anticipation to see what else had changed in the weeks since he set out on his journey. There was only one exit in the building, and Zac eagerly moved toward it.

"You can't just leave! You must register yourself first," a young woman nervously standing behind a counter said with a shaky voice, piquing Zac's interest.

"Register?" Zac asked, but before the receptionist could answer, three demon guards jumped down from the tree

crowns.

“Lord Atwood,” they all said with a small salute, and Zac nodded back.

“Lord? I’m sorry!” the girl quickly exclaimed, but it was quickly waved away by Zac.

“What’s going on here?” Zac asked the demons who appeared.

“Administrator Adran has set up routines for visitors. Due to many people coming and going nowadays, a system to know who’s here has been put into place,” the demon, whose name Zac remembered was Yuruf, answered.

“There’s traffic in the teleporter?” Zac asked, confused, as the teleporter was still set to trusted.

“Only between the internal array system,” Yuruf answered. “There are currently twelve arrays active in the archipelago.”

“I understand. My sister and two of her friends should have arrived some time ago. Are they settled okay?” Zac asked.

“Yes, we followed the instructions in the letter. Your sister is currently living in your compound. The other two have been provided houses in the residential district. They are spending most of their time at the academy, improving their power,” the demon answered.

There were too many things within his compound that would be hard to explain, so he didn’t wish two strangers staying there. It was better to make it clear from the beginning, which was why he’d had them stay in the residential area from the start.

“Good. Has there been any trouble in the town while I was gone?” he asked.

“Nothing much. A few hotheads acting up, but nothing we couldn’t handle. There also have been some disputes amongst the craftsmen, but the administrators would know more about that,” Yuruf responded.



“I’ll visit them later. One last thing, are the fighters back from the fight at the other incursion?” he asked.

“They returned some time ago. The mission was a success, though there were some casualties.” The demon nodded.

“I understand. Keep up the good work,” Zac said as he headed toward the exit.

He didn’t actually register himself in the end. It wasn’t because he felt himself above it, but since it was a matter of security. Powerhouses like himself were the biggest deterrent from attacking a town, and if people didn’t know where he was, they would be less likely to cause trouble.

Satisfied, Zac walked toward the exit, but before he left the large lobby, Zac couldn’t help noticing the large sign hanging by the exit.

**Welcome to Port Atwood, the home of the Towers of Myriad Dao!**

- 1. Don’t cause trouble.**
- 2. Don’t enter the restricted areas.**
- 3. Don’t forget to shop at the Thayer Consortium, the best deals on Earth!**

“Uh,” Zac couldn’t help saying as he looked back at the demon guards. “Towers of Myriad Dao?”

Yuruf scratched his chin as he looked at the gaudy lettering of the slogan, looking a bit embarrassed before explaining the situation.

“The castellan of the Towers somehow found out about this sign. It felt... very strongly... that its grandeur should be advertised to all visitors immediately upon arrival. When Administrator Adran refused, citing security concerns, it wasn’t happy. A sign advertising the Towers, large enough to block out the suns, appeared over the town. Thus the sign here.”

Zac grunted in affirmation before he exited, inwardly complaining about the insane Tool Spirit.

It only took a minute of walking before the trees gave way to the town proper, as quite a bit of the forest had been cut down. At first look, Zac had a hard time believing the sight that met his eyes.

A proper town with a wide array of buildings sprawled out in front of him. The town wasn't like anything he'd seen before, but rather a mix of various styles and concepts. Buildings wrought from living trees stood wall to wall with modern buildings that could fit right into some trendy affluent district.

The new Port Atwood felt very refreshing, with large amounts of nature being mixed with the structures. It was a far better place to work on one's Dao or cultivation than the dirty and rundown towns on the mainland, and Zac had no difficulty believing that many would wish to move here if given the opportunity.

There was still a lot to be done, though. There was no sort of pavement on the roads, and construction was taking place all over. People, a lot of whom Zac didn't recognize, kept scurrying back and forth, many carrying lumber or tools meant for construction.

Zac decided to head straight for his private area after a bit of hesitation, moving right toward a large gate in the wall separating his private district from the newly emerging town.

He noted that the wall was manned by a few demons and Valkyries, who perked up when they saw his approach. However, with his robe and shiny bald head, he was easily recognizable, and the warriors hurriedly opened the gates for him.

"Welcome back," one of the Valkyries said with a small bow.

Zac didn't know how he felt about the bows and curtsies the population was starting to perform. He would have to talk with Ogras later to see whether he was responsible for it.

"Thank you. Is my sister at home?" he asked.

“She left for the academy some time ago,” the guard answered.

“Could you have someone call her over,” Zac said.

“Of course,” she said with a nod, and one of the Valkyries immediately ran toward the direction of the academy.

Zac simply thanked the guard and soon found himself back in his familiar courtyard, relaxing and enjoying a bottle of whiskey he had saved for himself for some time.

Some noise from the outside half an hour later told him that his sister was back, and he shouted to let her know which building he stayed in.

“I still can’t believe that this whole place is yours. You’ve got expensive taste,” Kenzie said as she walked into the beautiful courtyard with widened eyes.

“Well, Emily lives here as well. I assume you’ve met her by now? And sometimes I have guests. You can take whatever building you like if you haven’t already,” Zac explained as he indicated for her to sit down.

“Was this place really just an uninhabited island before?” she curiously asked.

“Yeah, in the beginning, it was just me and a bunch of barghest on the island,” Zac said with a shake of his head.

“What about Hannah?” she asked with a weird face.

Kenzie knew that he had been away on vacation with his girlfriend when the integration took place.

“All of them turned out to be cultivators. What are the odds?” Zac said with a sardonic smile. “I still don’t know where they ended up.”

“What would you do if you found her? Would she live here as well?” she asked.

Zac only threw an amused glance at his sister. He knew she wasn’t the biggest fan of Hannah for some reason, but he was a bit surprised she still held on to those kinds of feelings after such a long time.

“I don’t know. Maybe not?” he said with a shrug.

“So you’re, like, the king of this island? I’ve never been treated so well before,” she said, changing the subject.

“Uh, I guess. And don’t take advantage of people. I don’t really bother with all that, though. I have other things to worry about,” Zac answered.

“Then what do you do all day? Just sit here and drink like some hobo?” she said with a glance at the bottle of whiskey he had by his side.

Zac snorted and shook his head.

“I wish. I need to get stronger,” Zac said, his face turning serious. “I promised to protect you at Dad’s grave, and there are so many enemies.”

Kenzie only looked down with sad eyes. He’d told her about their father the day he saved her, not wanting to hide it from her. Though she had cried a bit, she soon recovered, only mentioning that she wished to visit the grave as soon as possible.

It was a harsh reality, but most people had already come to terms with the fact that most of their friends and family had passed away. There barely were any families who had gone unscathed by the fall, and theirs wasn’t an exception.

“By the way, those towers over at the entrance look so cool. You could learn a lesson or two from Brazla,” Kenzie said with shimmering eyes as she looked at the towers shining in gold and white in the distance.

Due to the height of the structure and the extremely gaudy display, there were few places in Port Atwood where you couldn’t spot at least part of the building. As if responding to her words, the rainbows and celestial rays increased in intensity, almost reaching a blinding luminescence.

“Living in a place like that would be like living in the middle of a Las Vegas casino,” Zac said with a grimace. “Have you talked with the Tool Spirit?”

“Yeah, he’s a nice guy. I think he’s a bit lonely, so I usually visit him once a day for a bit.” She nodded. “He says that one of the inheritances is a good fit for me.”

“Oh?” Zac said, curious.

That also worked as an excellent segue into why he’d asked her to come back to their home. There were still a few questions in Zac’s mind, questions that weren’t proper to ask in front of the other two girls.

The more he thought about the weird ball that had entered Kenzie’s head, the more uncomfortable he got. It was simply unnatural that something so powerful didn’t give off a single speck of energy. He wanted to get to the bottom of the matter now that they were alone, so he could help out if there was some trouble.

But before he had time to go into that issue, he was interrupted by Kenzie.

“I heard you’ve traveled a lot in the past months. Did you find any clues about Mom?” Kenzie blurted out with hopeful eyes before Zac had a chance to ask his questions.

Zac was taken by surprise by the question, as he honestly hadn’t really thought about his mother since the integration.

“I couldn’t even find her before the world got randomized. I wouldn’t even know where to begin to look now,” Zac answered with a shrug.

Zac saw his sister was gearing up for an argument they’d had many times before, and for a second, it felt like he was back in his apartment as Kenzie stomped around in frustration. However, he quickly had an idea and took out a small box from a pouch. It contained the things he’d brought from their home in Greenworth, and he took out the amulet his father had left.

Their father had mentioned that it was a memento from their mother in his diary, and Zac thought giving it to Kenzie might pacify her a bit. But before he had time to hand over the amulet, they were interrupted by two demons entering the courtyard.

“So you’re back,” Ogras said with a small smile as he sauntered inside.

“Don’t you ever knock?” Zac asked with some annoyance as he looked over at the demons entering the courtyard.

“Get yourself an array if you want privacy; otherwise, I’ll treat it as if an open-door policy is in effect,” Ogras answered as he threw one of his annoying smiles toward Kenzie. “Hello again, beautiful.”

Zac’s eyes thinned as he glared toward Ogras, his aura starting to leak out a bit. Kenzie noticed her brother’s change in demeanor, and with a roll of her eyes, slapped his arm.

“Cut it out,” she muttered under her breath.

“So sister-in-law is here as well. It is good to see you again,” Alea said as she pushed Ogras out of the way as she walked toward Kenzie with a warm smile, not even sparing Zac a glance.

“Sister-in-law?” Mackenzie asked with some confusion as she let Alea hook her arm in hers.

“Don’t let that human girl hear you say that,” Ogras said with a grin, drawing an angry glare from Alea.

Kenzie simply seemed amused by the chaos the two were creating and was content to be a spectator of it all.

“Alea is just kidding around,” Zac said to his sister before turning to Ogras. “What human girl?”

“Oh, we found a girl who claims to be your girlfriend. Hannah something,” Ogras said with a shrug.

“Hannah’s here?” Zac said, his face quickly souring as he glared at his sister.

She only shrugged her shoulders with an impish smile when seeing Zac’s face. Alea’s mouth curved up in a smile as she saw Zac’s reaction, but only ushered Kenzie out of the courtyard.

“Come, let’s sightsee a bit. Let those two bores talk things out. I have a great tea that I have saved for a special occasion

such as this,” Alea said as she pulled Kenzie away.

Just before she exited the courtyard, she threw one last look at Zac. “It’s good you’re back.”

“Have fun,” Zac distractedly said as he waved the two away, a confused frown adorning his face.

Ogras snickered as he looked at a peeved Alea, who turned away with a harrumph.

However, the mirth on Ogras’ face quickly drained away as he saw the amulet in Zac’s hand.

“Why do you have that thing?” he said with an uncommonly serious voice.

“Why do you care?” Zac asked with some confusion as he looked down at the memento in his hands.

“Because it is a Technocrat insignia.”





## LEANDRA

Zac skeptically looked up at Ogras as he fiddled with the amulet in his hands.

“What are you talking about? It’s impossible that this is something from the Technocrats. I picked this up on Earth years ago,” Zac said, hiding the true origins of the amulet for now.

“Trust me, I know. The demonic horde is very much in favor of the Ruthless Heavens, which makes the Technocrats one of our prime enemies. Everyone learns to identify their kind in case we run into them in Mystic Realms or out in the wild somewhere,” Ogras said.

“What I am curious about is how it could have gotten here. It doesn’t make sense...” Ogras muttered until his eyes suddenly widened. “Unless Earth was a planet owned by the Technocrats.”

“What? I think we humans should have known about that?” Zac answered with some skepticism.

However, the calmness was only on the outside. His heart was hammering fast, as his mind was a mess. If what Ogras said was true, just what did it mean? Was his mother an alien? The note left by his father said that he should use the amulet if he wanted to find her. Did his father know something as well?

The matter of Leandra, their mother, was still shrouded in mystery. She had simply disappeared not long after Mackenzie was born, and his memories of her were quite hazy by now. His father refused to talk about it, even though Kenzie had

repeatedly tried to arrange a meeting with her. Their dad only responded once, saying that their mother had gone home to her family and that she wasn't coming back.

Zac had left it at that, always bearing some resentment for her actions. He had just been a kid as well, but he still remembered the sadness that had marred their father's face as he took care of the infant Mackenzie.

However, Kenzie didn't have that resentment and kept pestering Zac to help her find Leandra. Finally, Zac relented a few years ago, even hiring a private investigator to track the woman down. Oddly enough, there wasn't a single bit of proof of her ever even existing. Even their birth certificates didn't mention her, only listing their father as a parent.

The only explanation that the investigator could come up with was that Leandra was an illegal immigrant, which was why there was no paper trail of her existence. Zac had to give up at that point due to a complete lack of clues, much to Kenzie's disappointment.

But now another, far more fantastical explanation had revealed itself. There was a possibility that she was actually an alien, as crazy as it sounded. But that possibility only led to more questions.

What was she doing on Earth? Why did she leave, and why didn't she come back? If she had to leave, why didn't she bring her family with her? Questions whirled around in his mind until a cough awoke him.

"What?" Zac said, looking over at Ogras.

"I said that some Technocrats might have used this place as a lab for experiments. I mean, they want to remove the Ruthless Heavens, right? Perhaps someone was researching a planet outside the Heavens' control," the demon said.

"That might be it. Well, it doesn't really matter, I guess," Zac said with a shrug as he put the amulet away. "If they were still here, they should have shown themselves by now, right? Or packed up and left."

Ogras' eyes thinned a bit, but he didn't push the matter any further, much to Zac's relief.

"So what's your plan with your girl?" the demon said instead. "Want me to take care of the problem? I'm sure Alea is willing."

"A lot has changed in the six months since the fall," Zac said with a sigh, ignoring his comment. "I am not the Zac from before, and she likely isn't the same Hannah either. Where does that leave us?"

"Well, you should probably figure it out. The girl has repeatedly asked about you, causing some ruckus. No one has dared to say no to her so far, unsure what your reaction would be," Ogras retorted with a widening smile, likely looking forward to the coming chaos. "I haven't let her inside the inner area, though, much to her annoyance."

Zac only shook his head, unsure how to respond. He had myriad things on his mind at the moment, and Hannah suddenly being back was truly not something he'd expected. He'd actually mostly forgotten about her, having more pressing matters on his mind until now.

"So you're back already from the rat incursion?" Zac asked, eager to change the subject.

"Yeah. It was a success. It only took two days, wasn't too desperate a fight. That giant had actually exhausted their reserves quite a bit all by himself. He'd been killing Ratmen at least eighteen hours a day for half a year," Ogras said with a wry smile. "Don't make that guy an enemy; he must have some special constitution. I've never met anyone having that strength at such a low level."

"What?" Zac asked with some shock. "You don't think we're his match?"

"In a head-on confrontation? Probably not," Ogras said. "I'd guess that mammoth has over 500 strength, and his club takes perfect advantage of that. He crushed the defensive array the Ratmen had set up with just one swing, taking half their

town with it. I'm not sure I would have been able to destroy the array at all, no matter how much time I was given."

"He must have done some crazy things in the Tutorial. Of course, if we wanted him dead, it wouldn't be too hard; he's not very balanced. He needs a good support system to bring that disgusting Strength of his to full use," Ogras added with a vicious glint.

Zac shook his head in disbelief. He knew that the Tutorial gave out good benefits to the top cultivators, but this was above what he expected. It seemed he needed to be careful around the others as well, especially Thea and Salvation.

"So what's next?" the demon suddenly said.

"What do you mean?" Zac asked.

"Didn't you fight up to this point just to find your sister and have a place to stay? You've done that now," Ogras said as he gestured at the many courtyards in the area.

"Are you pushing for my retirement?" Zac asked with a small smile.

"Just curious," Ogras said with a shrug.

"I have a quest," Zac said after some hesitation. "A trial of sorts. I plan on doing it before the Treasure Hunt starts."

"I thought you were skipping the Treasure Hunt?" the demon asked.

Zac only sighed as he shook his head. "It's not like I have much of a choice. I can't stop and relax in this shitty new reality. If I do, then someone will kill me."

"The will of the Ruthless Heavens," Ogras said with a grin.

"Actually, regarding that point, I have a suggestion. You're nearing the bottleneck. There are a few things that can't be done after you evolve," the demon continued.

"Hmm?" Zac asked halfheartedly.

"Well, there are two opportunities before you. The first is the Tower of Eternity. Ascending the tower can only be done

before evolving. Not taking that opportunity would be a huge missed chance. Everyone who gets the chance to go there will take the trial,” the demon said.

“Secondly are the inheritances. The inheritance needs to begin at F-grade class as well, according to the Tool Spirit,” Ogras added.

“Alyn mentioned the Tower some time ago as well. Just what is it?” Zac asked curiously.

He didn’t mention that he stood to gain an entrance token soon and actually was already thinking of going. He knew the demon wanted him to go for some reason, and Ogras would be more forthcoming with information if he thought he was trying to trick him into going.

“It is unclear,” Ogras said, but quickly added when he saw Zac’s skeptical face, “It’s something that has just been there since the beginning of time, it seems like. Some believe that it houses the brain of the Ruthless Heavens. However, you can only get to the tower with the help of a token, as it is impossible to find without them. Rumors say that even the top people of the Multiverse have scoured the Multiverse for the tower, intending to make it their treasure, but it’s always eluded them.”

“The tower consists of nine floors, and each floor is further split into nine worlds. The further you manage to travel up the tower, the greater the rewards. In theory, the highest possible grade is eighty-one, nine by nine. However, I’ve never heard of anyone getting that far,” Ogras continued.

“So what are the rewards?” Zac probed.

“The tower contains all manner of treasures, and it also provides a title that gives stats, depending on how far you reached,” Ogras simply answered.

It sounded a lot like the title that the cultivators got from the Tutorial, Zac realized. Perhaps pushing all the way to the ninth floor would give a huge boost to his combat power. However, Ogras’ next words shocked him.

“If we help each other out, we stand a chance to make it to the fourth floor, perhaps even past a few tiers there,” he said with desire in his eyes.

“What?” Zac asked, shocked. “Only the fourth floor? Aren’t the towers limited to F-grade people?”

“Oh, you think you’re some hotshot because you can beat up some useless cultivators on this baby planet? You are strong, but only in the context of this planet. Don’t look down on the forces of the Multiverse. There are F-graded people with advanced Daos and unimaginable titles, people far surpassing a thousand points in a single attribute before they evolve.”

Zac’s eyes widened in shock. It was a good reminder that he couldn’t get complacent. Lately, he’d almost felt like an immortal as he met various people. But he was just a normal person who had caught a few lucky breaks when his planet got integrated. It couldn’t compare to whatever the great forces of the Multiverse provided their young.

“Wouldn’t that mean we’d be risking our lives going there?” Zac asked skeptically.

“Well, getting stronger always comes with risks. But those kinds of monsters are rare, and people are more concerned about ascending more tiers in the tower rather than expending energy on fighting with strangers. Just keep your head down and push forward,” Ogras said without a care.

Zac felt things weren’t as simple as the demon was implying, but he knew that the Tower of Eternity wasn’t something he should ignore if he wanted an Epic class.

“Besides, we’ll be able to watch each other’s backs. We only need to get an inheritance each before we go, which would boost our survivability noticeably,” the demon concluded.

Things clicked in Zac’s mind as he looked over at the demon, who innocently looked back. It seemed there was an inheritance he really wanted, and Zac was pretty sure which one it was.

“*We* need to get an inheritance?” Zac asked wryly.

“Of course. You should get one as well. It might be dangerous, but the opportunity outweighs the risk by far,” Ogras said. “Besides, I can undergo the test first, scout things out. So to speak.”

Zac only snorted in response. The two spoke for a bit more before the demon receded into the shadows again. He seemed a bit annoyed that Zac wouldn’t give a clear go-ahead on the inheritances, but Zac didn’t really care.

He would likely give one to the demon sooner or later. He was pretty sure Ogras wanted the Umbra inheritance, and Zac had no use for that. But he wouldn’t just give it away before thinking things through properly. They were onetime gifts, and he only had eight of them. As for himself, he was a bit unsure of what he should do. He currently felt that there were multiple interesting choices available.

His initial thought had been to go with the Titan inheritance, since he was mainly Strength-based. An alternative was the Undying Fiend, which sounded to be Endurance- or Vitality-based. One would improve his battle prowess and the other his survivability, and either sounded like a good option.

However, his experiences in the Dead Zone made him look at a new option: the Lord of Cycles inheritance. While Zac couldn’t be sure, it did seem to align with his new core and new attainments into the Dao. That was provided that the cycle the inheritance spoke of was the cycle of life and death, of course.

It all came back to what he was aiming for. He still had a hard time deciding whether he should focus more on the core and Dao, or his axe work. The largest risk as he saw it was that he might need to somehow attain another Dao Seed that could act as the opposite of the Dao of Trees.

The Dao Seeds of Sharpness and Heaviness weren’t really suited to represent the Miasma-filled side of his core, making his skillset a bit mismatched. Zac had thought about the issue for days now and still couldn’t come up with a solution.

However, there was still time, so Zac once again tabled the matter as he stood up and headed toward the Nexus Node. He really needed to speak with his sister, but she was off god knows where with Alea, so he would have to wait.

In the meanwhile, he had a skill to attain. Soon he found himself at the crystal, and as he touched it, a surge of information entered his mind as he gained a new fractal, and this time, it was right on his chest.





## TOP-TIER CHEAT

Zac's mind was filled with a burst of information that told him how the skill worked, but he still chose to try it out after some hesitation. He headed over to an empty area inside his compound that was still just forest, and activated the new fractal. A huge torrent of energy surged from the area and entered his body. This wasn't the same thing as absorbing energy, but rather forcefully ripping it out of the atmosphere.

Cracking sounds could be heard throughout his body as it felt like he was injected with a hundred adrenaline shots. Boundless power surged into his limbs as he took out his axe without thinking. The extreme amount of power gathering within him needed an outlet.

With a roar, he swung his axe with all his might at the innocent trees. It was as though a bomb had gone off in the forest, with decimated trees covering the area.

He felt as though he could topple mountains at the moment, but after roughly thirty seconds, the feeling was gone, replaced by a sense of weakness. The skill [**Hatchetman's Rage**] was a boosting skill that actually increased all his attributes by 25% for around ten seconds.

Better yet, it seemed as though the increase also worked on the attributes he gained from titles as well, as he'd gained over 80 points in Strength while the skill was in use. A boost of 25% was not something to scoff at going by how attributes worked.

It would increase his combat strength by quite a large margin during the effect, which would help push him ahead in a close battle. It might even allow him to defeat a stronger opponent in a quick turnaround if he caught the enemy unaware.

However, the skill wasn't without its drawbacks. It seemed it messed with his head a bit. When the energy entered him, he felt ready, and willing, to take on the world. It also left him weakened after usage. It didn't consume a lot of Cosmic or Mental Energy, but it was rather as though his body was overtaxed, like he might have felt after running a marathon back in the day before the integration.

He slowly headed back to his courtyard, and it took over an hour before he was back in good condition again. Clearly, he had to be careful with the skill, just like with Nature's Punishment. He needed to end the fight by the time the effect ran out; otherwise, he'd be a sitting duck.

Familiar steps could be heard after a while as he saw a flustered Kenzie run over.

"What's going on? What happened earlier? Did you get into a fight with Ogras? The destruction could be seen from the town," she said as she looked around with a frown.

"I only tried out a new skill of mine," Zac said with a shrug. "Sit down. We need to talk."

"You destroyed a forest to try out a skill?" his sister said with a shake of her head, but she still sat down next to him.

Zac suddenly had a thought and opened the Town Shop. Not long after, two small arrays were erected around the courtyard. One was an **[E-grade Small-Scale Silencing Array]**, whose job was to block any sound from escaping, and also impede any types of spying skill.

The other array was a normal illusion array that hid the interior, the very same type as he'd used around his camp before. It should look like the courtyard was empty from outside, from how he understood it. He still had the original array somewhere, but he didn't remember where it was

anymore. Since it was quite cheap, he bought an upgraded version for 250,000 Nexus Coins, making it even harder to see through.

Finally, he put up a third array, the weak defensive one he'd purchased some time ago. Wasting no more time, Zac took out the amulet and handed it over to Kenzie, who accepted it with a confused glance.

"What's this?" she asked as she held up the intricately designed amulet.

"I found this amulet with a note from Dad when I visited Greenworth. The note said that it was a memento from Mom, and that we might be able to use it if we wanted to find her," Zac explained, hiding nothing.

Kenzie looked at the small amulet with marvel, as though it were a map leading to some grand treasure.

"How do we use it?" she excitedly asked as she grabbed Zac's arm.

"That's the problem. I just found out something pretty weird about that thing. It might not be from Earth. Ogras said it is a Technocrat insignia, like an emblem from a Technocrat nobleman."

"Technocrat? What's that?" Kenzie asked with some confusion.

Zac suddenly realized that the Technocrats might not be a subject that was broached in the Tutorial, as they opposed the System.

"It's an extremely powerful force in the Multiverse. I don't know a lot about them apart from the fact that they are an enemy to most other forces, and that they don't use Cosmic Energy. Instead, they use extremely advanced technology, like science fiction stuff. They are the most advanced force in the Multiverse in that sense," Zac explained.

Kenzie's eyes widened until she looked down at the amulet in her hands with a slight frown, saying nothing. Zac would have thought his sister would have a ton of follow-up questions, but she only silently stared at the amulet. But her

silence told him that it might not be as big a shock as he expected, and soon he understood why.

“What’s going on?” Zac asked. “I saw that shield around you when the guy exploded back in Kingsbury. It didn’t contain even a scrap of Cosmic Energy. And the ball flew right into your head afterward. Are you okay?”

“I... I think I understand now,” she said. “When the Tutorial started, I was the same as everyone else. Luckily, I survived the first trials and got stronger. However, after the fifth trial, I suddenly heard a voice in my head. It wasn’t the System, but someone else. It told me it had finalized integration.”

“Another voice?” Zac asked with some concern.

“Yeah. At first, I thought I had gone crazy, but the voice told me it was an assistant system. I soon figured out that it was real, as it warned me of imminent attacks that I didn’t notice myself. Since then, it’s helped me in various ways, and I probably wouldn’t have survived the Tutorial without it. It changed the way I channel my cultivation manual to become more efficient; it helps me in battle and in all kinds of ways. It even modifies my skills to become stronger,” she explained.

Zac frowned as he looked at his sister, thinking of the ball in her head. From the way she explained it, it almost seemed that there was an artificial intelligence helping her. But that should be impossible, as that type of technology and the cultivation system shouldn’t be possible to merge.

It was one of the basic rules of the Multiverse as he saw it, and the very reason that the Technocrats were so desperate to either destroy the System or create an Apostate of their own. The Dao of Technology was blocked, and merging Cosmic Energy and technology should be impossible. The thing in her head sounded like something impossible.

“It never told me what it was, so I guessed it was some special reward I got from the System for some reason. But now I think it might have been Mom who left me with this thing to protect me?” she said, her face brightening. “Perhaps

she knew the integration was coming and wanted to give me something to help me survive.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Zac said after a while.

However, inwardly, he wasn't as sure. Zac saw a very different scenario. He thought back to what Ogras had said earlier, that Earth might be a lab for experimentation by the Technocrats. Did their mother experiment on Kenzie when she was an infant, potentially putting her in danger?

Finding ways to trick the System and integrate technology into a cultivator should be a huge goal for the Technocrats and the first step in creating an Apostate of their own. If what Kenzie said was true, the thing in her head might be highly valuable Technocrat technology.

Still, he didn't say these things out loud. There was no point in starting another argument about such things. And there was nothing he could do about the situation apart from trying to get stronger in case something happened. But he knew he was just kidding himself. The Technocrats could be considered an A-grade force.

They could incinerate this whole planet in an instant if they wished, and there was nothing he or anyone else on Earth could do about it. He prayed that he was wrong about his speculations, or that something unexpected had happened, making the Technocrats unaware of the marvel inside Kenzie's body.

Suddenly, Kenzie handed the amulet back to Zac, who took it with some confusion on his face.

“Mom already gave me this assistant to protect me, so you should keep the amulet. It might have some method to help you as well,” she said.

“Are you sure?” Zac said, but in truth, he was quite happy to take back the amulet now that he knew more about what was going on.

He was afraid that it might be a beacon or tracker of sorts, so he would prefer to keep it away from Kenzie if possible.

“Hmm... How about this,” Zac said as he opened the Town Shop again.

Soon another box appeared in front of him, and he took out another amulet and gave it to Kenzie.

“Since you don’t want that amulet, take this one instead. It was *very* expensive, so wear it at all times,” he said with a grin.

His sister rolled her eyes, but she still put it on with a smile.

Zac wasn’t lying when he said it was expensive. It cost 20 million Nexus Coins and was one of the most expensive arrays in his Town Shop at the moment. It was called [**E-grade Supreme Ward**] and was a mobile array just like his Mother-Daughter array.

However, its function was much more varied. It was a defensive talisman that protected the wearer in all kinds of ways as long as she stayed within a certain range of Port Atwood. It was an array that many forces bought for their young to protect them from assassinations.

It had a few functions. First, it had a strong shield that automatically protected from sudden attacks. It might not be necessary for Kenzie, but it was better than nothing. However, Zac had bought it for its other functions. For one, it protected against spying or scrying skills, making it hard to locate her or spy on any secrets inside her. It also protected against mental attacks or hypnosis.

It was the only thing he could think of right now that might keep her hidden from any potential spies of the Multiverse. He truly believed that the fact she possessed an artificial assistant must be kept a secret to protect her. That thing inside her might be even more explosive than his Creators’ shipyard. Kenzie might be hunted down by the various forces of the Multiverse if they knew, and who knew what the Technocrats would do.

“Does anyone else know about the assistant thing in your head?” Zac asked.

He was determined to keep this secret just between the two of them, even if he was forced to do some gruesome things.

“No, I knew it was a bit odd from the start, so I never told anyone, not even Lyla,” Kenzie said with a shake of her head.

“Good. Let’s keep it that way,” Zac said with relief. “I will try to look into the Technocrats some more, but we need to be careful. We don’t know what happened to Mom. If she truly is a Technocrat, the situation might be pretty complicated. The Technocrats have so many enemies, and we might implicate both ourselves and Mom if we rush things.”

“I know,” Kenzie said, not being able to hide some of her disappointment.

“Hey, don’t worry. We finally have a lead for the first time ever. We’ll find her. But we need to focus on getting stronger as well,” Zac said with a smile.

“I get it. I’ll be patient.”

“By the way, you never told me what class you were,” Zac asked instead, changing the subject.

“Well, I picked Acolyte, a Common-grade mage class,” his sister answered. “But Jeeves – oh, that’s what I call the voice – upgraded it to Elementalist, an Uncommon one.”

Zac speechlessly stared at Kenzie for a while. That thing in her head was truly a top-tier cheat.

“What about you?”

“Well, it’s called Hatchetman, a Rare class,” Zac said with a shrug.

“Hatchetman? How’d you get such a stupid-sounding class?” she asked with a smile.

Zac chortled before he told her the tale of what he had been doing when the integration came knocking. Soon Kenzie was laughing as Zac explained how he’d fumbled along with his lumberjack’s hatchet, living in a dented and bloodied camper, looking like a hobo covered in strips of snake leather.



“So what are you going to do about Hannah?” she suddenly asked.

Zac grimaced at the question. With only a shake of his head, he got up to his feet and wistfully looked in the direction of the town.

Some things couldn't be prolonged any longer.



## THE NETWORK

Zac still wasn't sure what he should do with Hannah as he slowly walked toward the gate leading to the town proper. When Ogras had told him she had been found, he felt... nothing. Simply too much time had passed since they last were together.

The time they had spent apart was more than twice what they had actually been together, and since then, Zac had experienced one life-altering event after another. And it wasn't like they were some childhood sweethearts or soul mates. They were two lonely people who had found each other on a dating app.

Besides, the little he'd heard about her causing trouble since she arrived at his island made him quite annoyed. However, he would have to form his own opinion, as there usually was a hidden agenda behind the demon's words. But in the end, Zac knew he was just psyching himself up with various justifications and excuses.

He almost wished that some weird void would open up and spew out a horde of monsters. He would much rather go through a deadly battle than this muddled situation.

Soon he arrived at the gate once more and, after asking the guards, headed toward a certain neighborhood of the residential district. It didn't take long to find the building, since not only was the neighborhood one of those closest to the gate leading to Zac's area, but it was also guarded by a demon and a Valkyrie.

Zac's brows scrunched together in displeasure as he walked up to the two guards, who quickly recognized him.

"Lord Atwood," the demoness quickly said.

"You two can go back to your usual duties. This place doesn't need guards," Zac said with a nod.

The two guards gave each other a quick glance and hastily complied and left. Zac took a deep breath and knocked on the door. It didn't take long before he could hear hurried steps, and the door was practically thrown open as Hannah hurried to open it.

She looked as beautiful as when they'd first met, perhaps even more so. Say what you would about the integration, the Cosmic Energy made people look better, as long as they survived. However, to Zac's surprise, she didn't wear normal clothes, but rather robes similar to those that Alea and Alyn wore.

There was a hint of confusion in her eyes for a second as she looked at him. Zac couldn't blame her, as he'd truly changed a lot more than most. However, Hannah soon realized who he was, and her eyes quickly filled with tears.

"Zac!" she said and threw herself in his arms, her body racked by cries. "I didn't know if I'd ever see you again."

"I am glad you're fine," Zac said with a smile.

"I heard that you came back," she said after having found her bearings. "Come in."

Zac hesitated for a second but soon followed behind her into her house. It was neat and clean inside, though the furniture was quite eclectic. He briefly wondered how she'd managed to get so many things on this isolated island. Then again, many of the surrounding islands had a lot of buildings that were deserted; perhaps there was a lot of it lying around.

"Are the other three okay?" Zac said as he stopped in the living room.

"Only David's still alive," Hannah said with a shake of her head. "Izzie and Tyler didn't make it."

Zac nodded with some exhaustion, not feeling too surprised. He knew that only two people surviving was the expected outcome, and that only half of a Tutorial group dying was considered one of the best outcomes.

“I wanted to find you, but we were trapped on that island, and that crazy guy messed with our heads,” Hannah said, placing her hand on his chest. “But that’s okay. We’re finally together again.”

As Zac looked down on her beautiful face, he forgot about everything for a second. He remembered the awkward first date, turning into a relationship that gave respite from the bleak reality of being an adult with no real direction in life.

However, reality soon came crashing back to him, and he knew that those times would never come back. Her house might feel like a secluded enclosure hiding them from the world, but it was only a mirage. Shaking his head, Zac extracted himself from Hannah with a sigh.

“Hannah, we need to talk.”

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Zac was still feeling sour as he walked into the large building that was currently the core of operations of Port Atwood, but he forced himself to regain control of his emotions. Meeting Hannah again had been a roller coaster of emotions. But then again, most breakups were.

He realized he had painted her as some sort of villain in his mind, desperately grasping at every negative he’d heard in order to make himself feel justified. But ultimately, there was only one justification. They had simply fallen out of love since the apocalypse, and their relationship had died along with the fall.

Besides, he didn’t know what to believe. Ogras had insinuated that she was causing trouble, but she had looked completely baffled when he’d mentioned it. As she explained things, she’d tried to work in the government, thinking it

would help him to have people he knew and could trust there, and not only strangers with their own agendas.

Zac could somewhat understand that sentiment as he walked through the halls of the large government building. The faces he saw were mostly those of strangers, and even those he recognized he barely knew the names of. None of those who ran his town would he dare trust his life to.

That wasn't to say that Hannah necessarily had his best interests in mind. While she seemed the same as the girl he'd dated half a year back, no one had truly gone through the integration without changing a bit. Everyone had gotten harder, more cynical. Those who didn't were long dead.

In the end, he had promised he'd find work for her and David, but Hannah had rejected it, saying that she wanted to focus on getting stronger. She'd even mentioned joining the academy. Zac only acquiesced and promised he'd provide the two with resources. It was the least he could do.

Not long after Zac entered the large building, a clerk Zac didn't recognize hurriedly ran up to him with a small bow.

"Lord Atwood," she said with some reservation in her voice. "Administrators Abby and Adran are expecting you."

"Lead the way," Zac simply said.

He wasn't sure how he felt about the address, as it felt odd to be called a Lord by the humans. He guessed the employees had adopted the mannerisms from the demons, who had stricter hierarchies in their societies.

Soon he found himself in a meeting room with the people, or eyeballs, responsible for keeping his town running.

"I am glad to hear you found your sister in good health," Abby said as she bobbed in the air.

"Thank you. How have things gone while I was away?" Zac asked.

"Well, Port Atwood has advanced on various fronts. Today, 83,432 citizens are within your network," Adran began.

"Network?" Zac asked.

“We have started setting up various satellite facilities on neighboring islands. These settlements are equipped with [**F-grade Teleportation Arrays**] and therefore can be easily accessed. We currently have five settlements, whose purposes are mainly various types of resource farms,” Abby filled in.

“Five settlements? The guards at the teleporter said there’s twelve,” Zac said with some confusion.

“Two teleporters lead to the larger human towns that are able to self-sustain. We saw no reason to move everyone here to drain resources,” Abby explained. “We believe that living in Port Atwood should be considered a boon and something only for those who contribute to the faction. Therefore, when we find refugees on new islands, they usually get moved to one of the other towns.”

“And the other teleporters?” Zac asked.

“Another two are for the beastman settlements. One leads to Azh’Rodum, and the eleventh goes to the Zhix hive,” Abby said.

“There’s still one more, no?” Zac said.

“Yes, but it is a bit special. It leads to a small camp we placed on an extremely large island we found. It is the only island so far we’ve found that’s even bigger than this one. From what we can tell, the island is uninhabited, but it is teeming with strong monsters,” Adran said as he handed Zac an information crystal.

“So it’s a place for our people to gain combat experience and levels?” Zac asked as he accepted the crystal.

“Well, partly that. But there are also energy signals that indicate that there actually might be a Mystic Realm somewhere on the island,” Abby said, once again starting to bob around in excitement.

“Oh?” Zac said, somewhat unperturbed.

“What’s with that reaction? That is huge news!” the Stargazer said agitatedly. “Depending on what’s inside, it could be an enormous boon for Port Atwood.”

“But couldn’t it just as likely be full of E-graded monsters or even worse things?” Zac retorted.

Exploring a Mystic Realm was an extremely dangerous undertaking, and some forces had to sacrifice thousands and thousands of people in order to secure it. And even then, the realm might not lead to any benefits in the end.

A Mystic Realm was a huge gamble, and Zac wasn’t sure he had the resources to roll the dice at the moment. He only really had a few hundred combatants, far too few to venture into a dangerous place like that.

“Well, yes, but great rewards always come with some risk. That’s the way of the universe. Besides, we don’t need to explore it right now, apart from perhaps sending a scouting party to sound things out. If it’s dangerous, we’ll simply reinforce the portal and revisit the issue when we’re stronger,” Abby explained.

“Is there any risk of something emerging from the Mystic Realm to wreak havoc?” Zac asked.

“It’s highly unlikely. Unless we open the vortex from our side, they can’t do much. They would need to brute force it, and that would require extreme powers. If such strong beings lived inside the Mystic Realm, they would have broken out long ago,” Adran explained. “And I find it highly unlikely the Ruthless Heavens would attach such a dangerous place to a recently integrated world.”

“Well, I won’t send anyone inside there against his will,” Zac said after some deliberation. “But if someone wants to take a gamble, we can give it a try a bit later. I will visit the island and take a look for myself. But for now, I want to focus on the incursions.”

“Well, I am sure that Ogras has told you, but the Ratmen Incursion was vanquished, becoming the second incursion being closed on the planet. We also found two more potential targets while fighting over there. The residents of Billyville had allies who also live close to incursions,” Adran said.



“Oh?” Zac said. “Are they affiliated with the New World Government?”

“One is unaffiliated, while we are unsure about the other. However, both of them wish to wait until after the Treasure Hunt,” Adran said.

“What do you two think?” Zac asked.

“The Ratmen Incursion should be considered a low-tier incursion, just like that of Clan Azh'Rezak,” Abby said, drawing a glare from Adran. “Both the incursions mentioned by the allies of Billyville sound like medium-tier incursions, and you would likely need to join unless you're willing to accept mass casualties among your soldiers. As for the high-grade ones, I am not sure we're ready to take those on at the moment.”

Zac nodded his head in thought, not too surprised. The fact that it only took a few days to eradicate the Ratmen Incursion proved they couldn't have been too strong. The easier incursions were dealt with, leaving the harder ones. He also felt he had to agree with Abby's assessment of their current power.

Even with three of the generals taken out of commission in the undead army, he wasn't confident his side could vanquish the incursion. There were still another three generals remaining along with the leader. Furthermore, they would be at the core of the incursion, where the Miasma should be thickest, along with who knew what kind of arrays.

Zac also understood why people wished to postpone attacking the incursions until after the Treasure Hunt. From how it sounded, there would be quite a few power-ups waiting inside for the powerhouses of Earth, which would help immensely in the fight against the invaders.

The only question was how long the mission would last. It wouldn't do any good if it took months to complete since that would leave most towns without proper defense from their most powerful people, while also allowing the limitations of the invaders to be removed.

The briefing went on for another hour, and it seemed everything was under control. He wasn't really needed for anything, as he was mostly used for deterrence so that no one would act up. Besides, with the demon soldiers walking the streets, people were keeping themselves in line.

Since it was getting late, he soon headed back to his home to rest up. Soon after he came back, Emily came by his courtyard, forcefully scampering over the decorative wall, uncaring that the gates were closed. The teenager had met up with Kenzie earlier, and from what he could tell, the two had hit it off well.

It appeared she was overloaded with gossip, and a seemingly unending stream of juicy tidbits came pouring out of her mouth. It was everything from the fact that Ryan was trying to woo one of the Valkyries, to an Ishiate workshop exploding in the commercial district twice in one day.

There apparently had been a large fight between Emma and Julia as well, something about their future path. Zac could guess that while Emma wanted nothing to do with the government, Julia wasn't so sure. He made a mental note to sit down with the government official soon.

He hadn't really talked with her since she arrived, but the events at Kingsbury made him realize that he needed to do something about his relationship with the government before the shape-shifters ruined them from within. Turning Julia into a proper liaison for Port Atwood might not be a bad idea.

Finally, the teenager reminded him that her birthday was in a few weeks before she scampered off. Zac only smiled and shook his head, his spirits lifting somewhat. He threw the matters of Hannah and Port Atwood into the back of his head and instead focused on what was ahead.

His next goal was the quest for sovereignty, but since he didn't know how long it would take, there were still some things he needed to get done first.



## ISLAND TOUR

After resting up for a few hours, Zac stepped through his private array, arriving at one of the first satellite towns of Port Atwood. Only a brief moment was needed to understand that this was one of the farming villages that had been created to provide the town with a steady supply of grain and vegetables.

Two Valkyries were resting by the gate, but they quickly got to their feet when they saw the teleporter activating. Normally, there were no guards stationed at the portal, as this place was only accessible through the main teleporter, and the traffic was controlled from there.

However, Valkyries and freshly recruited warriors were sent out to all the satellite towns en masse to clean out the islands. There would always be a need for some warriors to safeguard the area from beasts in the future, but the manpower needed would be drastically reduced if all dangerous wildlife was culled first like on the main island.

Zac nodded to the two resting Valkyries before he headed out toward the fields. This personal inspection was something he had decided to do before he left for the First Step of Sovereignty-mission. For one, he was still feeling a bit emotionally unsettled from yesterday, and he didn't want to undergo the trial when he wasn't in peak mental condition.

But more importantly, he felt the need to show his face a bit more and make sure that everything was running smoothly. Hannah's words struck a chord with him, reminding him that he couldn't entrust everything to others.

He generally believed the demons and Abby the eye were working with his best interests in mind, but he also knew that both Abby and Ogras sometimes fudged the truth in order to reach their goals. The only people on the island he felt he could truly trust were Sap Trang and Kenzie, but both were focusing on improving their power.

Showing his face would give the population a reminder who was the true leader of Port Atwood.

The fields were abuzz with activity, where demons and humans worked together to get production going. The fields still looked mostly barren, apart from a few places having sprouts emerging from the soil. Most of the work still consisted of clearing the area of trees and stone, turning the island into proper arable land.

After looking around, he spotted a familiar face. It was the demon who was in charge of agriculture for Clan Azh'Rezak.

"How are things progressing?" Zac asked as he walked up to the demon.

He looked over at Zac with some surprise but quickly found his bearings.

"Lord Atwood, I didn't expect to see you here today," he said. "Things are progressing just fine. It might not look like much at the moment, but I believe we will have our first harvest within two months. Of course, it's all mortal-graded seeds we're planting."

Mortal-grade was what things below F-grade ranked were called, and another name for it was unranked. The normal grain and vegetables were all unranked, as they didn't naturally contain any Cosmic Energy.

The thick Cosmic Energy in the atmosphere might imbue the vegetables with some energy, but it was negligible. You would have to eat an insane amount of tomatoes or wheat grown from mortal seeds to gain a power-up.

"Sounds good. Have you procured any spiritual seeds yet?" Zac asked.

“We have bought some, though it might take a few years until production is to a point that it can feed the upper echelon of the island,” the old demonic farmer said with a shrug. “We have planted a few small fields on the main island for those things, and we should start to see results within a year.”

“How come you didn’t plant everything on the main island? God knows we have a lot of free space,” Zac said.

It was true, as his main island was enormous. Even with his speed, it took hours to cross the whole thing, and it would be possible to fill the large empty areas with fields. Currently, 99% of the island was just forest where barghest roamed. That would allow the crops to benefit from the even denser energy in the atmosphere of the main island.

The old farmer’s eyes lit up, but soon he shook his head.

“Actually, farmland absorbs a huge amount of Cosmic Energy, especially Spiritual Herbs. If we planted too much on the main island, you’d soon notice that the density of energy in the air would get worse. That’s why many forces’ herb farms are in Mystic Realms, as their towns would turn into energy-starved ghettos otherwise,” the demon explained.

“It wouldn’t be a problem in the short run, as the population is still quite small, but as the citizens grow more numerous and more powerful, the energy consumption will increase. It’s better that we already have a proper infrastructure before reaching that point. And it’s not like it is a problem that these crops take a few weeks longer to grow due to the sparser energy; everyone will be fed,” the farmer continued.

“The balance between the energy in the Heavens and the earth of your farmland is something every farmer needs to understand. If you get too greedy and plant too valuable things, you’ll likely lose the harvest.”

Zac finally understood why the plan had been to farm on other islands from the start. He completely agreed with the farmer’s sentiment. The vein beneath the island could only produce so much energy per hour, and it was better that energy

went to his citizens and creating more Nexus Crystals firsthand.

Besides, since the island was quite close to his own, the Cosmic Energy in the area was still pretty dense, making it a great place for farming. Zac stayed on for a bit and talked about the plans for the island with the various farmers until he bade farewell and moved to the next one.

The next island he visited was a mining encampment, and the foreman of the shaft did not share the farmer's view on balance. His eyes glistened when he talked about the treasures of the deep, seemingly itching to go down there and hunt for his fortune.

The man might as well have been a dwarf, going by the greedy gleam in his eyes. It was only after talking with a few of the other miners that Zac found out the foreman didn't care about the treasures and only cared about the thrill of the hunt.

This mining encampment was not mining for crystals like the mine at Azh'Rodum, but rather for various metals. It was placed on an island with a mountain with a reddish hue. The foreman explained that while they had only encountered mortal-grade metals for now, they might encounter F-grade materials as they dug deeper.

Zac was a bit disappointed that there were only ordinary resources here, but then again, only normal materials were needed to produce all kinds of things for the town.

Like this, Zac went from satellite village to satellite village, seeing how things were going. He was happy to see that there weren't really any problems so far for the demons and humans working together. Actually, he'd heard of a few couples having formed already. He'd been afraid the vastly different societies the demons and humans came from would cause some friction, but humans were flexible if anything.

After he was done making the rounds, he left for his final destination, the mysterious island that held the potential entrance to the Mystic Realm. The scene when he stepped out from the teleporter was quite different from the others.

There were only a guardhouse and a few tents, with four demon guards sitting around a concealed fire, having supper. They quickly got to their feet when they noticed Zac's arrival, but calmed down when they noticed it was only Zac.

"Where's the Mystic Realm entrance?" Zac asked after greeting the guards.

"It should be a couple of hours of travel north," one of the guards answered. "The teleporter was placed close to the edge of the island to give us some room in case something happened."

"Like what?" Zac asked with a frown.

"There's a risk of the teleporter getting interference from the entrance before it's properly stabilized. If it burst some extra amounts of energy, everyone would be stuck here until rescue came by boat," another demon explained. "Also, it's just too dangerous further in. We can only handle the beasts at the edge."

"Strong beasts?" Zac mumbled, taking another look around as he left the camp in the direction the demons indicated.

He finally realized that the camp was mostly hidden within a small crevice of a small hill, secluding it from three directions. Furthermore, when he turned around after walking a bit, he noticed to his surprise that the camp was completely gone, making him finally realize where his old illusion array had gone.

This was a completely different setup compared to the ones he'd seen on the other islands so far. The Stargazer had mentioned that there were strong beasts on this island, and it seemed that might have been an understatement if the demon guards had to be that careful.

He wanted to have a proper look for himself about what was going on with this island. He was afraid that Abby was downplaying the dangers to his town for the chance of a large payday. He didn't delude himself that the well-being of the



humans in the town was her main priority. Besides, there was something else he wanted to test while he was here.

The forest had a more tropical feeling compared to the one on his own island, though the level of mutation seemed largely the same. As he walked through the woods, he concealed his aura tightly, and it didn't take long until he was accosted by a beast.

### **[Crazed Lemur – Level 58 – Strength]**

The level of the beast made Zac's brows rise. It was almost the same as his own, and it was just the first thing he met on the island. Zac took out his axe and swung it at the primate, but it deftly dodged as it almost flew into a tree nearby.

Before it even landed, it pushed away from the trunk, causing cracks on the tree from the force, instantly rebounding toward Zac with a screech. This time, Zac focused properly and swung his axe once again with lightning speed.

A torrent of blood splashed on the ground as the primate lifelessly fell to the ground. Zac frowned as he looked down on the beast, the blood quickly sloughing off from his robes. The strength of the animal wasn't what bothered him, even though it likely was a match for most of the demonic warriors.

It was the fact that the core in his body hadn't absorbed a smidgeon of Cosmic Energy from the kill. Zac had hoped that he would be able to keep improving his core by using normal kills, where the neutral energy would fill both sides of it. Since the core had formed, he'd only killed the undead, making him unsure of how it worked.

Unfortunately, the core stayed completely inert as a surge of Cosmic Energy entered Zac's body. He already knew that this was a distinct possibility, as he knew that the core didn't care about the energy from normal Nexus Crystals. He did, however, know that the Miasma Crystals were effective since he'd briefly tried it while waiting for Kenzie in Kingsbury.

Zac shook his head as he kept moving deeper into the jungle. It appeared that he would have to visit the Sky Gnome and open his wallet after all. The core hadn't shown any

indication of how much energy it needed to be completed, and feeding it might turn him into a pauper.

While a couple of million Nexus Coins was quite decent, he knew that in terms of wealth in the Multiverse, it was nothing. Zac knew that to simplify things, the System actually graded Nexus Coins, just like with crystals.

A million Nexus Coins was worth just one E-grade Nexus Coin. As for the higher tiers, Zac didn't even own a fraction of a fraction. The System hadn't even bothered to convert his coins to higher tiers, since his wealth was just too low to make it worth it.

Still, he'd have to check with Calrin before he started to despair over his supposed poverty. The mining operations were proceeding smoothly in his crystal mine, and he might actually be able to do a straight trade between life-attuned crystals and neutral ones, not spending a single coin.

Zac instead kept pushing toward the center of the island and noticed that the energy in the atmosphere kept growing. Furthermore, the closer to the core of the island he got, the stronger the animals became. It appeared the island had built a strict hierarchy, where the stronger beasts got to have territories with denser energy.

To his delight, he noticed there was another boon to coming to this island, apart from the Nexus Coins and high-grade meat. The beasts might not have been able to improve his core, but something else was gleefully feeding as the beasts fell one by one. **[Verun's Bite]** was turning the excursion into an all-you-can-eat buffet.



## MERIT AND DEBT

As soon as his targets were above level 60, [**Verun's Bite**] started to absorb blood again, just like it had with the mink he'd killed long ago. Zac was delighted, as he hadn't found anything that it wanted apart from blood and the stone.

As he kept going toward the core of the island, the fights became more intense, creating widespread destruction in the area. After an hour, Zac started to imbue his strikes with his Dao to end the battles quickly. After having walked for two hours, he'd killed well over a hundred strong beasts, and his Cosmos Sack was quickly filling up with high-level carcasses.

He also made some interesting discoveries about his axe. It appeared that it didn't just take any type of blood. Every time he killed a beast, it took a small amount of its blood, but far from all of it. Furthermore, it only took blood from each type of beast once. Zac ran into a pair of leopards, for example, and the axe only absorbed blood from the first kill.

It almost felt like the axe was taking trophies in the form of blood from the various types of beasts it killed. Zac started to hypothesize that perhaps the method to upgrade his axe was to collect enough types of blood.

That realization made him stop for a second, making him wonder if the types of beasts he killed had any impact on how the axe would turn out when it upgraded. Perhaps feeding it with inferior blood would result in an inferior upgrade.

However, now was not the time to worry about such things. Everything was still a hypothesis. And besides, if the

axe followed convention, it would require a few types of E-grade blood to evolve. If the blood had an impact on the upgrade, then the E-grade kills would likely be far more important than the F-grade blood.

With that in mind, he kept cutting a path straight toward the core of the island. He was initially worried that the commotion he caused would draw attention to himself, but he soon realized he didn't need to worry about that. Raging battles kept happening all over, with beasts fighting for territory or just for the heck of it.

However, suddenly, a primordial roar echoed through the forest, coming from somewhere close to the center of the island. Even Zac stopped and hunkered down, his body physically impacted by the reverberations it caused. It was the call of an E-grade beast.

Zac didn't move a muscle, instead warily looking around for a minute until he got up to his feet again. After the powerful roar, there was no follow-up, perhaps meaning that it was simply a reminder of who was the king of the jungle.

It appeared that the other beasts in the area came to the same conclusion, and soon the forest was filled with the roars of various beasts once again. Zac hesitated a bit but decided to keep going. He really understood why Abby and Adran had no idea whether there actually was a Mystic Realm here or not.

Unless Ogras personally entered the fray, anyone else would simply throw their life away heading to the core of the island. Zac knew he wasn't immortal either and started going more carefully, not wanting to lure whatever was the source of the animal cry earlier.

He was pretty confident that he would be able to defeat a normal E-grade beast, as he'd gotten quite a bit stronger since he'd fought the Fiend Wolf. However, there were many unknowns in this forest. For one, being a beast that had already evolved told Zac it was no average animal, but it had likely had its own lucky encounters.

Furthermore, there was nothing that said that there was only one of them at the core of the island. Who knew, there

might be dozens of E-grade beasts idling about, and that would be too much even for Zac.

He kept sneaking forward, now starting to avoid battles. The closer he got to the core of the island, the calmer it was. There likely weren't as many beasts in the top tier of power, and the fights for territory might not happen as often. Any battle here would likely garner quite a bit of attention, something Zac really didn't want at the moment.

After a while, Zac finally stopped, as he'd reached an edge leading to an abrupt cliff. He quickly got down on his knees and looked around, and realized he was next to a huge crater. Just a quick glance around told him that it was over a hundred meters deep and at least a few kilometers across.

The bottom was covered with another forest, with huge trees fighting for space. He got a sense of foreboding as he looked down at the dense forest, hesitant whether he should actually head down or not. Before deciding anything further, he instead took out a pair of binoculars, trying to glean anything of importance.

It was with some relief he realized that he wouldn't have to go down after all, after seeing what was going on in the core of the crater. There was an area of a few hundred meters where nothing grew, creating a stark contrast to the lush surroundings.

In the middle of the desolate field, something that could best be described as an anomaly was fluttering about. It reminded Zac a bit of the phenomenon that occurred when he used [**Nature's Punishment**], as it looked like cracks in reality.

However, the center of the anomaly was far more chaotic, looking like a large hole that phased in and out of reality. Zac pretty much knew he was looking at a wild unstabilized entrance to a Mystic Realm, even though he'd never seen one before. He simply couldn't imagine it being anything else.

That at least proved that there wasn't a supreme treasure in the center of the island causing the high density of the energy

the beasts enjoyed. He took out a crystal that recorded the scene in front of him before he started to move backward.

Judging by the high density in the area, the Mystic Realm likely had a quite high density of energy as well, rather than being a desolate pocket of subspace. Zac saw no point in going down into the crater to investigate further at this time. The crater was likely home to the most powerful beasts, including the E-graded one that roared earlier.

He started making his way back toward the secluded camp, going in a slightly different direction. The fights with the elite monsters on the island didn't hold him up much but provided both a good deal of experience and Nexus Coins.

When he reached the camp, he told the demons about his findings, and they looked quite excited by the Mystic Realm. Zac realized he likely wouldn't have any trouble finding volunteers for exploring the realm in the future, going by the demonic guards in front of him.

He stepped through the teleporter, this time finding himself in the main arrival lobby. From there, he walked to the commercial district for the first time since coming back.

Before he left, the district had simply been former battlefields and forests, with the only exception being the Thayer Consortium headquarters. But as he walked, he saw that the district had changed much in the same way as the residential district.

The square that would be the core of the district stood finished, and a few hawkers had actually set up stalls. From what he could tell, they mainly sold daily necessities for now, but Zac was sure that it would improve in the future.

The plots of land surrounding the square were still mostly empty, as they were earmarked for special buildings. One exception was that the Thayer Consortium owned a satellite store placed right next to the future placement of the bank.

It was time to enact some things that they had decided upon in the meeting earlier, so Zac brought up his menu and started to browse structures to purchase. Since he'd become a

Lord and Port Atwood had been designated a Global City, more structures had become available for purchase. Of course, the drastic increase in population helped as well.

Most of the structures still were locked out, though, as it seemed that a pretty basic requirement of most venues was to have a population of one million, which Port Atwood wasn't even close to. He wasn't sure how he'd get there in the short run, as the archipelago he controlled simply wasn't very populated.

Even when they found people on an island, there was usually only something like a hundred of them. The upside was that the average strength of these people was far higher compared to those who were safe within large towns on the mainland. There were barely any people below level 15 in Port Atwood, a sight that was quite common in places like New Washington.

Soon he found the structure he'd agreed upon yesterday with Abby, but before he was able to buy it, he was interrupted by a familiar figure walking up to him.

"What are you doing here?" Zac asked as Alea walked up to him with a smile.

"I was bored, so I was thinking of having tea with the Sky Gnome," Alea said as she looked at the empty plot Zac had been focusing on. "But this seemed more interesting. What are you doing?"

"I'm getting the contribution store we talked about some time ago," Zac answered as he made the purchase.

A large building was quickly materializing in one of the empty plots close to the square. It looked like a large box with huge rectangular windows letting light in. Otherwise, the building was completely unadorned apart from a large sign hanging above the four-meter-tall doors.

### **[Merit Exchange]**

"Golems and their sense of beauty," Alea said with a shake of her head as she surveyed the contribution center before she turned back to Zac.



“So are there any benefits to being friends with the big boss himself? Do you provide any good discounts?” she said as she hooked her arm in his with a wink.

Zac smiled a bit at the quip and was about to answer, but his smile froze when he saw a familiar face in the distance.

It was Hannah, who was holding a piece of leather armor that seemed to be one of the latest creations by the inscriptionists. She was mutely staring at Zac and Alea, who likely looked like they were in the middle of a romantic outing from how Alea acted.

Zac wanted to say something, but Hannah simply turned around and walked away with hurried steps. Zac extricated himself from Alea with a sigh, but as he did, he noticed a small smirk on Alea’s face that was quickly erased. However, it was too late to hide, and Zac felt rage build up inside him. Alea had played him, probably in order to hurt Hannah, who she saw as her competition.

“Never do something like that again,” Zac said with a growl, his words punctuated with a wave of a brutal aura that pushed Alea back and drained the color from her face.

Zac’s mood had been completely soured by Alea’s ploy, but he would have to set things right later. With a face that made the citizens quickly and quietly leave the area, he entered his newly purchased building.

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Humiliation rushed through Hannah as she hurriedly walked toward her home. David had told her she was being delusional, but she had refused to believe the rumors. She thought she knew Zachary, and that he wouldn’t do something like that.

Scenes of sneering glances by the citizens the past week flashed by in her mind one by one as she hurried down the streets. It almost felt like everyone she passed was laughing at her and her folly.

How could she have been so stupid? People must have been thinking she was a gold digger, trying to curry favor in order to gain some benefits from the big boss. Was that to be her fate, to live in the shadows of her former lover and his new mistress?

Finally, she was back home, forcefully slamming the door behind her as she entered her little sanctuary. The walls shielded her from the stares of the world, and she breathed out in relief.

The exhale seemed to have drained her energy as well, as her legs slowly gave out, and she found herself sitting down on the floor. Two streams of tears ran down her face as the suffocating feelings from yesterday exploded in her chest.

She was truly a fool. She had thought herself like the princess in some fairy tale. Not only did Zac's army save her and everyone else from the lunatic who kept them prisoners for months, but he also turned out to be a real prince. The real protagonist of the new world they lived in.

But clearly, she was no princess. Even after yesterday, she hadn't given up, instead hurrying over to the merchants to get some gear. She needed to get stronger so that she could stand next to Zac with her head held high. But the prince had already found a new princess, shattering her dreams.

Sadness and humiliation was quickly transformed into fury as she thought of that woman's sneer. Hannah just knew that demoness had whispered poison in her boyfriend's ears for months, ruining everything. The anger gave her strength, and she started pacing back and forth in her living room, imagining strangling Alea with each step.

Her eyes fell on the bottle of champagne she'd arduously acquired for her and Zac's reunion, and with a snarl, she hurled it into the wall, creating a fizzy explosion.

"That demon bitch," she spat out between gritted teeth.

"So you got kicked to the side, huh? What did I tell you?" a voice sounded from the shadows, making Hannah turn around.

“Shut up,” she snarled at David, who only sardonically shook his head.

If Zac had seen the man today, he would have been shocked. David had seemingly turned into a completely different person, and he radiated a sinister aura. The fall changed some far more than others.

“These demons will push us out of the picture. Zac is our chance to rise; you saw those inheritances. They are our opportunity. We need to get stronger so we can protect ourselves. Remember what happened to Izzie,” David said.

Hannah stopped her pacing, a frown emerging on her face. It was true. This life was no fairy tale, and Zac was clearly no Prince Charming. Her eyes slowly hardened until she looked up at David with a nod. A small smile emerged on his face, and he took out a slender dagger from within his robe.

“Take this. You wouldn’t believe what I had to endure to obtain this offensive array. It will be useful to us,” he said, placing the handle in Hannah’s hand before leaving the house.

The dagger felt cool to the touch like she was holding a piece of ice, and she thoughtfully looked down at it. She had waited for so long, only to be toyed with and betrayed. Just what was the debt, and who were the debtors?

**[New quest: The Price for Betrayal]**



## SAVINGS AND EXPENSES

Some commotion took place when people saw a building appear out of nowhere, many curiously looking at what was going on. However, no one dared to get close after seeing Zac enter looking like a storm cloud, allowing him to be undisturbed in his meeting with the manager of the contribution store.

“Greetings, Lord Atwood,” a mechanical voice sounded as soon as he entered. “Thank you for choosing the Furem Harq Merit Exchange.”

The voice pulled Zac out of his brooding, and he put the matter of Alea and Hannah aside. He would simply have to talk to Hannah later and explain the situation. While he hadn’t done anything wrong, he didn’t want Hannah to think he’d immediately run to a new girl after breaking up with her.

The structure he’d purchased was a contribution management service. He’d long decided that he would purchase this service rather than trying to build a system up from scratch. There were so many things to consider, such as how to measure and grade all sorts of contributions to the town. Furem Harq was an ancient clan that had worked in this field for over 100 million years.

That time span was mind-boggling for someone who until recently had a hundred years’ life span. On Earth, great dynasties were measured in thousands of years, but they were just like the blink of an eye compared to the longevity of the Furem Harq Merit Exchange.

The golem-led company was on the slightly more expensive side when it came to these services, taking a larger cut, but they had many other advantages. For one, they guaranteed the safety of all resources managed by them apart from attack by a B-grade powerhouse or above.

Apparently, those kinds of people were considered walking natural disasters, and no one would insure against the whims of beings like that. Still, the policy was more than enough for an infant world like New Earth.

They also allowed a Lord to take out resources representing 25% of the deposited value at any of their subsidiaries through the Multiverse. It meant that if Zac ever got to the point that he left Earth to explore other galaxies, he'd have a convenient way to get some money that Port Atwood would continuously generate.

Most importantly, they had a completely unblemished record even after running their business for such a long time.

“Hello, welcome to Port Atwood,” Zac said, turning to the living machine that spoke earlier.

It looked quite different compared to the Creators. Rahm had looked like a faceless statue before he changed into a human shape, but the golem in front of him was a different breed.

It seemed to be created from liquid metal, forming smooth outlines that changed as the golem moved. Interestingly enough, its various body parts didn't actually connect, but were somehow held together through some invisible power.

It also had a humanoid face, though it was slightly jarring to speak to a head floating on top of the torso.

“I am Khar. Please, this way,” the golem said and walked to a large desk, where they both sat down.

From there, the golem asked about most aspects of Port Atwood, from what resources they possessed to what they valued and what their goals were. Zac truthfully told the golem everything, apart from mentioning the Creators' shipyard. He knew the questions were designed to find a proper contribution

model, so he didn't hold back. Besides, it wasn't like the paltry wealth he'd accumulated was worth much of anything to this golem.

"I would suggest we start by using model FH-83004. It is a merit exchange designed for emerging forces such as yourself," Khar said. "It focuses mainly on development rather than things such as war. The merit allocation is designed to promote personal improvement in citizens and creating new types of facilities, setting the foundations for Port Atwood to keep growing."

"What's the downside?" Zac asked.

"It is more expensive to run than many other models. Performing things such as gaining a class and later evolving are rewarded with contribution points. These things are usually taken for granted in established forces. There are also 'bounties' for creating facilities not yet available in the faction, or finding materials that are currently lacking. It's a method to teach the citizens how to improve by pushing them forward with money," the golem answered.

"Can it be changed later if needed?" Zac asked.

"Certainly. You, or your representative, can at any point change the model or make adjustments to the current one. However, be aware that sweeping changes to contribution are often met with displeasure by citizens," the golem answered.

"Okay, we'll follow your suggestion. A Stargazer named Veth-Abarak, or Abby, is my administrator and will come by and iron out the details later," Zac said as he put down a few Cosmos Sacks on the table. "These are the initial materials for exchange."

The pouches contained most of the things he'd collected since the integration, most of them coming from dead demons and the pouches of Rydel and the Corpse-lord. Of course, he'd already taken out everything that might prove useful to him in the coming months, or things he didn't want to be sold, such as the notebooks of Mhal.

“For now, the whole inventory can be public,” Zac added after some thought. “For the Dao Repository, Abby will go over the respective prices for the skills. The skills can only be listed but not bought so far. I need to inquire about some things first.” The value of the things in the pouches was likely equivalent to well over 100 million Nexus Coins, and hopefully seeing the mountains of wealth would make his people work harder, and also increase the trust in his faction.

“Certainly. Going by the model and the expected revenue turnover in the coming month, I would project the cost to be—” the golem said, but was interrupted.

“Is it possible that the Furem Harq could give the Kar’Arvadina-branch of the Iliex some face?” a lifeless voice suddenly sounded from behind, making Zac turn around.

With some surprise, Zac noticed that it was Rahm. It was a rare occasion for one of the Creators to leave their shipyard, and Zac’s best guess was that the Creators were acquainted with the force behind the Merit Exchange. Both of them were big players in the Multiverse, after all.

However, Zac soon realized that he might have underestimated the Creators by quite a bit, as the branch manager practically flew out of his chair as he ran over toward the Creator and almost fell down into a kneeling position in front of him.

“Lord Iliex, you honor our small clan with your presence,” he hurriedly said. “We were not aware that Port Atwood was friends with a branch of your great clan. Our clan will, of course, be happy to cede our charge for the management of this branch.”

“Business needs to have a price for no strings of karma to be sown. A charge of one percent should be fine,” Rahm said.

“Of course, it’s as you say. We’ll follow your instructions.” The manager quickly nodded.

Zac only gaped at the exchange. A one percent fee was the lowest the merit control center would ever go, but only huge



forces with revenues millions of times larger than Port Atwood got those kinds of deals.

“Good. And I count on your discretion about our presence to not inconvenience Lord Atwood. Currently, we are modeling our production after the designs of the Allbright Empire, a local peak force,” the Creator continued, his face still completely wooden.

“It won’t leave this one’s mouth on threat of death,” the manager hurriedly assured him.

The Creator nodded in affirmation before it turned to Zac. “Foreman Karunthel sends his regards,” Rahm said before simply walking out again.

Zac added visiting the spider-boss to the list of things to do. He had just saved Zac a lot of money, and he needed to thank him personally. After the short intermission by Rahm, the foreman was quite a bit more helpful, even giving him a few tips of things other successful factions had done to quickly improve their town.

The golem also heavily discounted the contribution plaques that they would distribute later. The plaques were both a wallet for the contribution points and also a recording device of sorts. It could somehow understand when people contributed to Port Atwood, and automatically awarded points according to the algorithm Zac had chosen.

Zac was astounded by the thing and wondered how such small plaques could have so many magical functions. The golem explained that the plaques were actually only subsidiary arrays to a mother array in the branch. The mother array in turn was just a subsidiary of an extremely powerful array in the headquarters of the company.

After finishing his meeting with the merit exchange, Zac headed toward the Thayer Consortium. Zac was happy to see that the derelict buildings on the compound had all been swapped out with new ones, giving the business a far better impression.

The inside of the store had changed as well, and the once empty shelves were fully stocked with all kinds of things. However, a large section of the store was covered with leather armor. Bringing the artists and watchmaker had been a good idea, it turned out, as they had changed their profession and were quickly becoming promising inscribers.

“Lord Atwood,” Calrin said as he approached with a frown.

“Hello, Calrin,” Zac said with a small smile as he saw the angry gnome. “You look chipper.”

“I still don’t understand why you need a merit exchange. Those places are bad for business,” the gnome grumbled.

“Well, they still need somewhere to spend their Nexus Coins,” Zac said with a shrug. “Besides, I heard that you’ve started opening branches?”

That perked Calrin right up, and he nodded enthusiastically. “Indeed. There are currently subsidiaries in the two human towns and one of the beastman villages. The subsidiaries generally sell a slightly improved supply of the things you can find in a normal General Store, with extra sections containing mainly the products of Port Atwood,” he said with a smile.

“However, there’s still only money coming in from our own people. I hope you’ll go out and help open branches on the mainland,” Calrin continued.

“I’ll work on it,” Zac promised. “Perhaps I can get some business during the Treasure Hunt in a few weeks.”

“Good. So what brings you here?” Calrin asked.

“Let’s go somewhere more private,” Zac simply said.

Calrin only nodded and led Zac to one of the private rooms that was meant for the appraisal of treasures that customers brought in. The Thayer Consortium didn’t only sell items, after all, but also purchased anything that they thought they could make a profit from.

After the doors were closed, Zac brought out one of the Miasma Crystals and placed it on the table.

“A Miasma Crystal? Their uses are a bit limited, so they’re amongst the least valuable attuned crystals,” Calrin said hesitantly.

“I’m not selling them. I need crystals that are the opposite of Miasma stones. Is there something like that? Like life crystals?” Zac asked.

“Is the wound still bothering you?” the gnome asked with a frown.

“No, it’s healed by now, but I still need the crystals. Preferably on a large scale,” Zac said.

“Well, there are crystals called Divine Crystals,” Calrin said after a while. “They hold life-giving energy, though it cannot heal wounds without being processed into pills. However, there are no F-grade crystals of that sort. Nexus Crystals with elemental affinities are usually E-grade and up, depending on the element. Some, like Time Crystals, are at least C-grade, from what I understand. I have never seen one.”

“What about the Miasma Crystals?” Zac asked.

“They’re an exception. From what I’ve heard, they aren’t formed naturally, but rather produced through unknown means by the Undead Empire,” Calrin answered with a shrug.

“So can you get your hands on Divine Crystals?” Zac asked.

“Yes, but they are not cheap,” Calrin said as he prodded the Miasma Crystal on the table a bit. “There are a lot of uses for Divine Crystals. Many powerhouses even decorate their cultivation areas with them, as they improve the ambience. They can also help prolong the life of the elderly, though the effect is very limited.”

“How much?” Zac sighed.

“An E-grade Divine Crystal is roughly one hundred times the price of a normal E-grade Nexus Crystal,” Calrin said.

Zac groaned at the quote, as it was even worse than he'd thought. One crystal being over a hundred times more expensive meant that each E-grade Divine Crystal cost half a million.

“Is that generally how much more expensive an elemental crystal is?” Zac couldn't help asking.

“It's on the more expensive scale, but they are usually fifty to a hundred times more expensive. It's simply much more beneficial to use attuned crystals to improve at higher stages. They also make arrays and such far stronger. They are simply superior.”

“Fine,” Zac said with a sigh. “Try to get twenty-five of them as soon as possible.”

“Always a pleasure doing business with you,” Calrin said with a widening smile.



## MAKING ROUNDS

Zac shot a glare at the gnome as he coughed up a deposit for the crystals. At least the purchase wouldn't completely financially ruin him.

"There's another thing," Zac said as he took out the lotus seed. "This came from a lotus flower that emitted intense amounts of life-attuned energy. Do you know what this flower is? My skill couldn't identify the flower."

Calrin carefully took the seed and looked it over. "I can't tell for certain, but I would guess that it's from a flower called Lotus of Harmony. It's a false D-grade Spirit Herb, just like the Tree of Ascension you asked about some time ago. The seed is quite drained, so it's quite unsure whether it can germinate, but I'd give you 25 million Nexus Coins for it."

Zac's eyes widened at the quote, and he wondered just how much it had been worth before he'd absorbed all the energy. His debt to the abbot just kept growing.

"I'm not selling. I want to try to plant it," Zac said.

It was worth fifty Divine Crystals, but Zac would still much rather have a lotus like the one Abbot Everlasting Peace had.

"Hmm..." Calrin said. "Well, I'm no expert, but it just needs water and dense Cosmic Energy, from what I know. It will slowly convert non-attuned energy into life energy."

"Do you think it would survive being planted in the Cosmic Water at the mountain?" Zac asked.

“Probably; it is known for the immense amount of energy it can hold. But again, I’m no botanist. Don’t come crying to me if the seed gets absorbed by the pond. Besides, it might come into conflict with the Tree of Ascension if they are planted in too close proximity. Spirit Herbs are like beasts; they have territories,” Calrin explained.

Zac simply nodded with some thought. He’d already formed an idea before, and he couldn’t wait to try it after Calrin said it was plausible.

After he left, he quickly headed to Azh’Rodum through the teleporter and rushed into the mountain. Soon he found one of the entrances he’d used before when he’d fled into the caverns. He wasn’t interested in going into the mines at this time, but he had another goal in mind.

After a dizzying number of twists and turns, he finally found himself in front of a large boulder. He was happy to see that everything looked the same as he moved the boulder out of the way.

Cosmic Energy, dense enough that it almost felt like it slapped him in the face, rushed out of the cavern as the boulder was moved. Zac quickly entered the cave and closed the boulder behind him.

The inside was similar to when he’d woken up here some months ago, apart from the fact that the energy seemed even denser than before. The various flowers were even lusher as well, all teeming with energy.

Zac picked a few of the various things growing in the cave, suspecting that most of the herbs and mushrooms should have evolved into graded plants by now. Perhaps they were worth some money, or it was at least possible to clone and farm them.

But that wasn’t why he was here. He walked over to the edge of the pond and, after some hesitation, simply dropped the seed into the water. He prayed that the intense energies in the pond would rekindle the spent energy of the seed rather than destroy it.

It was a big gamble, but if it paid off, his cultivation cave would kick up a notch in grade. Now he could only wait and hope for the best. There was one more thing he did before he left, which was to place multiple arrays to protect the cave.

The population on his island was growing, and it wasn't impossible someone would stumble upon this place before the mountain had been turned into a properly restricted area. His goal was for much of the mountain peaks to be turned into large private residences for those who wanted to cultivate in peace and had the wallet to pay for such a luxury.

The valley with the Tree of Ascension and the pond of Cosmic Water would be his private property, though, as he couldn't risk having people ruining his tree. He still didn't know what might come of it since its transformation, but it was still valuable.

Since he was done in the cave, he left, heading up to the valley. Life was slowly coming back to the secluded spot between the peaks, as the density of energy was just too high for it to remain as desolate ground. Grass and small shrubs had replaced the dry husks of the trees that the Tree of Ascension had absorbed.

He also noted that the size of the pond had grown back, though not to its original size, which was something he hadn't noticed from his cave. Zac was quite relieved, as it meant that his vein was creating more of the magical water.

He still didn't have much use for it, but it was apparently a great addition to most types of crafting. For example, quenching a new sword in Cosmic Water would likely improve the quality of the weapon a grade. However, his faction could still only create low-grade things, making such a method a waste of money.

Soon he found himself in front of the tree, and to his disappointment, it looked very much the same as the last time he was here. It still was weirdly mutated, but thanks to his Dao of Trees, he could sense that it wasn't dying, but rather slowly recuperating.



As he looked around, he found that the area had been completely cleaned. Last time, he'd only looted the possessions of the corpses, but now he realized he hadn't seen a single dead demon or monkey around since he entered. Perhaps Ogras had sent someone to clean up the area.

Or it might be Alea, Zac realized as he looked around the well-tended area in the vicinity of the poison tree. She might have worked hard to make sure it didn't die. The treasure that came from it would likely either be good for a power-up of a poison user, or an ingredient for an incredible poison.

Since everything was under control, Zac returned to town. After some thought, Zac decided to head to the tavern. When he arrived, he noticed the structure had expanded, or rather, been grown, by quite a decent margin. It now had multiple levels, and the base floor had swallowed a neighboring structure as well.

It was afternoon by now, and Zac noticed that the place had quite a few people in it, sitting in groups with mugs in front of them. A few waitresses were scurrying around as well, placing dishes and taking orders.

When Zac entered, a hush fell over the first floor as everyone gazed upon him with a wide range of emotions.

"Hey! What are you all staring at?" a shout came from the bar. "Have you never seen a humanoid tank before?"

Some snorts and subdued laughter could be heard, and Zac headed over to the bar with a smile.

"I see you have expanded," Zac said as he sat down on a barstool.

"What can I say? The apocalypse makes people thirsty," Ryan said with a wide grin.

"What's everyone drinking?" Zac curiously asked.

"Local beer. Or mead, I guess?" Ryan answered and poured a glass from a tap. "The demons almost hounded the poor brewer to death, but he managed to create the first batch in almost record time. We have two versions: a normal beer and a stronger version for the high-leveled people."

Ryan placed it in front of him. Zac took a swig. Objectively, it didn't taste great, but it was not bad for a newly set-up operation.

“So what brings you here?” Ryan asked.

“I have been too busy lately, so I haven't had much time to check on Port Atwood. I thought you might know how the citizens feel about their situation,” Zac explained.

“Well, I think people are generally happy here. Especially now that they are good and drunk,” Ryan said, looking thoughtful.

“No complaints?” Zac said skeptically.

“I guess one complaint is that it's a bit hard to level up for combat classes. The forest is full of those demon dogs, and very few can kill them. So they're stuck, as there's no other prey, meaning they will fall further and further behind. Some even think it's by design so that they'll be forced to join the army to get stronger,” Ryan hesitantly said.

“Hmm,” Zac said with a nod.

It wasn't something he'd considered, but the barghest had grown pretty strong by now. He'd considered them a great tool for grinding, but that was because he had extreme attributes and he'd fought them when they were affected by stronger limiters to their attributes.

If Zac looked at it as a video game, Port Atwood was the newbie village for many. But it was surrounded by a high-level zone, not letting people level up. There needed to be a clear path of progression for people, like the increasingly powerful enemies in an RPG.

It was something he needed to remedy, as he wanted his citizens to become stronger. The more powerful people that lived on this island, the safer it would be from attacks. He would have to ask Abby or Adran to fix the situation somehow.

“I'll see if some islands can be turned into safer grinding areas or something,” Zac said. “By the way, do you know anyone who has worked a lot with animals before the fall?”

“Worked with animals?” Ryan answered with some confusion. “Hmm, I think I heard from a customer a week ago that she worked at a pet store before the integration.”

“Oh?” Zac said, intrigued. “Where is she now?”

The two kept talking about various matters in the town for a few more minutes until Zac finally downed his drink and left. He walked, following Ryan’s directions, and soon found himself outside a building that looked like an apartment structure at the edge of the residential district.

They were structures that were being erected for the various people who didn’t bring much to the table. The experts and high-level individuals usually got their own houses, whereas the refugees had to make do with apartments. Zac felt it was a bit elitist, but both Abby and Ogras were insistent that they needed to create that type of society to force more powerhouses into existence.

He found the correct number on the third floor and knocked on the door while looking around. Soon a slightly malnourished-looking girl opened up the door, looking startled upon seeing Zac’s odd appearance.

“Can I help you?” the girl hesitantly asked as she looked upon Zac’s unfamiliar figure.

“I am Zachary Atwood. I heard you once worked at a pet store?” Zac asked, trying to look congenial.

“Atwood? Like the big boss?” she asked, her eyes widening a bit.

“Yes, the pet store?” Zac prodded.

“Ah? Yes, I worked at a pet store before. What’s going on?”

“How would you like to get the chance to work with pets again and even get a class for it? It would be a well-paid position as well since we need that kind of expertise,” Zac explained.

“You need someone to look after your pets? I can do that,” the girl said, her face brightening.

“Good, come with me,” Zac said with a smile.

Zac didn't mention that the pets he was talking about were a hive queen for an alien ant species and hyperaggressive demon dogs. That would be a happy surprise for later. For now, he needed to get her enrolled with Alyn and undergo the training regimen she had designed to make a Beast Master out of the pet store worker.

He soon dropped off Lily, which was what the girl was called, to Alyn. The schoolmistress looked very excited to try out her hypothesis in creating a Beast Master class without a Heritage and immediately got to work.

Before it got too late, Zac also went to the port to thank Karunthel for lending some help with the negotiations. He also tried to visit Hannah to explain the misunderstanding earlier, but she wasn't at home.

Finally, he was done with everything he needed to do at Port Atwood. There was also the issue with the Tool Spirit, but he felt he had to put that issue on hold for the moment. Partly because Brazla was just too annoying, and partly because he suspected any negotiations might go awry before he could provide it with some updates on the beautifications of its surroundings.

It was already late when he got back to his home, but he noticed that Kenzie was still out. She never mentioned anything about it, but Zac felt that her imprisonment had left a mark on her. She stayed at the academy all day, continuously sparring or meditating in the array, almost with a fanatic fervor that reminded him of the Valkyries.

It didn't feel like a healthy way to process, but perhaps mental health would have to take a back seat for the moment. Fear and helplessness might propel her forward when she'd otherwise stop trying to improve. With the thing inside her head, she needed to get strong so she could protect herself in case he wasn't around.

Since there was nothing much else for him to do, Zac decided to finally go through with his trial for sovereignty. He didn't know how long it would take, but he had provisions for

quite some time in his pouch. He also had all manner of pills and tools to help him out with most scenarios.

However, suddenly, he realized a problem. How the hell did he start the trial?



## THE FIRST STEP OF SOVEREIGNTY

Zac opened his quest menu to begin with and tried to mentally command the trial to start. When that didn't work, he tried to physically press the quest, but in the end, he only swiped his hands through the air.

From there, he tried various things, from touching the Nexus Node to doing various things with his teleporter, but he had no luck. Finally, he remembered something that Abby had said earlier. After he'd finished the quest, his town became a Global City.

One large difference between normal cities and a Global City was that the latter could provide off-world teleportation. And while his arrays were nowhere near strong enough for that at the moment, he did possess something that could do just that. The Nexus Hub.

However, that possibility gave Zac some pause. The Nexus Hub was meant for off-world transportation. If the hub was truly the method to start the quest, it meant that he would be transported god-knows-where in the Multiverse.

What would happen if he failed? Would he be stuck in some other corner of the Multiverse? He also didn't know how long these trials would take, as there was virtually no information on them.

However, Zac soon reignited his resolve. He already had made up his mind about doing it, and honestly, being teleported directly by the System or through the hub didn't matter much in the end. Besides, he had prepared a Coward's

Escape just in case, and those pills usually threw people right out of these kinds of trials.

But still, he chose to wait before he left, not wanting to go off-world before he'd talked with his sister. She knew about the quest, but not that he would be gone for an unknown amount of time. It was almost midnight when he heard her coming back toward his mansion, and Zac was still up, meditating, as he only slept a few hours a day. He quickly walked over to the courtyard Kenzie had chosen, and entered after knocking.

His sister looked a bit surprised to see him but still welcomed him to sit down.

“What brings you here so late?” she asked with a smile.

“I’m going to do a trial quest now, and it might take me off-world,” Zac explained. “I just didn’t want you to worry while I’m gone.”

“Off-world?” Kenzie said, actually looking a bit excited. “That’s so cool. You might become the first human to step on an alien planet. Take pictures.”

“What about the Tutorial?” Zac asked with a smile.

“I don’t think that counts; that was a temporary space and not a real planet,” Kenzie said with a shrug.

Zac only nodded in response, looking up at the stars.

“I heard a rumor you broke up with Hannah?” she hesitantly said after being silent for a bit.

Zac only nodded and briefly recounted what he’d done the past day.

“I know you weren’t a big fan of her, but please make sure that no one harasses her while I’m gone. I feel bad how it went down, and I don’t want others causing trouble for her,” Zac said.

“I didn’t think Alea would do something like that,” Kenzie muttered, looking a bit disappointed. “You need to talk to Hannah before you leave. Don’t be a jerk.”



“Fine,” Zac said with a sigh. “I’ll leave tomorrow morning instead after I’ve talked with her.”

“Good,” Kenzie said with a smile. “You’ve always been a bit awkward, but you need to talk things out properly. And don’t worry, I’ll find a new girlfriend for you while you’re away. What do you think about Lyla? She’s nice, and she’s asked about you. As for her body, I can promise that—”

“Worry about yourself,” Zac interrupted while rolling his eyes before taking out a box from his pouch. “I forgot to give you this the other day. It’s a **[Fruit of Ascension]**. It will not only improve your race to E-grade, but apparently, it will even help when upgrading your class in the future.”

Kenzie’s eyes lit up as she looked at the box, but after a brief hesitation, shook her head. “I don’t need it. Jeeves is helping me upgrade my race and says it will be done in two months. Besides, he’ll upgrade my class anyway, so the effect of this fruit is a bit wasted on me,” she said. “You should give it to someone else who has helped you a lot.”

Zac mutely stared at her for a bit before he wryly smiled and took back the box. Some people just had it too good. The two kept talking a bit longer until Zac finally left after exhorting Kenzie not to overdo it with her training while he was gone. As for whom he’d give the fruit to, there was no hurry to decide.

Early the next day, he got up and walked over to Hannah’s house once again. This time, there were no guards outside, and Zac simply knocked on the door and waited. He heard sounds inside, but still no one opened the door.

“Hannah, it’s me. Please open up,” he said, imbuing his voice with some cosmic power to make sure she could hear it.

The sounds inside stopped, and finally, the door opened as Hannah stood there with a frown, dressed in training gear.

“What do you want?” she tersely said as she looked at him.

“I... I just wanted to say I’m sorry for that display yesterday. I am not dating Alea, and we haven’t done

anything. She acted like that to mess with you, and I told her off for it,” Zac explained.

“Okay, it’s none of my business anyway,” Hannah answered with a shrug.

“I just didn’t want you to get the wrong idea. All I said yesterday was true, and Alea had no impact on us,” Zac continued.

“I got it. You only broke up with me because you don’t like me. Thank you so much for clarifying it for me,” Hannah sarcastically retorted.

Zac sighed at the cold reception and hope that things would get better with time. He wished he knew what to say to set everything right, but perhaps it was impossible, at least this close to the breakup. At least he’d cleared the air from his side, and now it was up to Hannah to accept it or not.

“As I said earlier, if you need something, just ask me or Kenzie, and we’ll do our best to help you in the future,” Zac said and walked away.

He didn’t want to prolong the uncomfortable situation any further and immediately headed toward the teleportation area. If he had looked back, he would have seen Hannah standing in the doorway, looking at his departing figure, her eyes as cold as ice.

Not wasting another moment, Zac teleported over to Azh’Rodum and quickly walked south. The huge crystal still stood on the field where the incursion had once been. The small guardhouse next to the crystal was unmanned nowadays, as there was nothing anyone could do with the hub at the moment.

The crystal still looked inert, but Zac went ahead and touched it just in case. A prompt immediately appeared, telling him that his suspicions were correct.

**[Start Trial?]**

Kenzie already knew what he was about to do, and as for the other people, it was just as well that they didn’t know he

was gone. Besides, for all he knew, the trial wouldn't take too long to complete. With determination, he accepted the prompt.

The moment he accepted, a blinding light flashed, forcing him to blink. When he opened them again, the scenery had completely changed, and he found himself standing in a large field. When he used the teleportation arrays, it usually took some time as he moved through the darkness, but the hub seemed to use some superior technique, as it only took a blink.

Zac guessed it was lucky for him, as it might take years to travel to some random planet in the same way that the teleporters used. He quickly looked, and he could immediately tell that he wasn't on Earth anymore. For one, the sky was almost black, and another clear indicator was that the Cosmic Energy in the atmosphere was almost nonexistent, to the point that it almost felt like Earth before the integration.

His knowledge was a bit limited on this front, but Zac guessed he was either on a declining E-grade world or even an F-graded planet. Even amongst the same grade, there could be large differences, and the better F-graded worlds might have enough energy for people to reach the top of the F-grade within their lifetime.

However, evolving on such a planet was likely a pipe dream unless some very special circumstances took place, like someone finding a series of lucky encounters.

However, the sky or the sparse energy wasn't the real reason he didn't think he was still on Earth anymore. There was a medieval army consisting of odd humanoids standing around him; thousands of faces looked at him with various expressions.

The humanoids were pretty short, barely reaching Zac's chest, with thin frames. They had large sets of eyes that were pitch black, with white sallow skin. The tops of their heads had white or gray hair that generally was long and tied in various braids and knots, with colorful bands woven into it. Their hands and feet looked oversized compared to their bodies, almost to comical proportions.

Zac guessed they couldn't weigh much more than thirty to forty kilos, but still they wore thick metal armor and carried large, grisly weapons, which told of surprising strength in their small frames. He did sense that there was some power in many of the aliens, though no one had the aura of a powerhouse.

The sense of power was most obvious in the few aliens who stood in front of him, looking at him with expectation. Zac didn't feel any sense of danger from his sixth sense, so he didn't believe that these things were his enemy, at least not yet. This gave him some time to try to figure out what was going on. His quest only said to complete the trial, but never explained what the trial was.

As he looked around, he saw that the crystal that had transported him here hadn't followed him, but he rather found himself standing on what almost looked like a very crude fractal. He almost felt like a demon lord for a second, having been summoned by some hapless acolytes.

"Lord General, what is that being?" one of the weird humanoids said as Zac looked around.

Its voice was slightly high-pitched, but overall, it sounded like a human's.

"The tablet only said that a powerful champion would be summoned," a well-equipped alien hesitantly said as he held a few ancient-looking scrolls in his hands.

**[The First Step of Sovereignty. Step forward with purpose. Let nothing stand in your way.]**

While it wasn't exactly clear what the System wanted him to do, it appeared that the System had created a scenario for him to fulfill, almost like in a video game. What he didn't understand was whether this was all a simulation, or whether he'd actually been thrown into a real conflict in some corner of the Multiverse.

It felt a bit coincidental that he'd accepted the quest at the moment these things tried to summon some champion, lending some strength to the first theory. However, the Multiverse was

impossibly large, with a mind-boggling number of populated worlds, where most of them were these low-tiered ones.

Perhaps things were always happening that would suit the purposes of the System's quests, and it simply dropped him here to let him figure things out himself. The aliens seemed content in trying to understand what they had summoned, so he took the time to check up on them as well. He turned to the two aliens who spoke earlier, and used his identification skill on them.

**[Antaya – Solvim – Level 28– Dexterity]**

**[Dresdo – Solvim – Level 42 – Endurance]**

It appeared their species was called Solvim, and neither of them was too strong. Still, Zac was surprised they could gain levels at all with such sparse energy in the surroundings. It must have taken years, perhaps decades, of effort to get to their current point.

“Hello,” Zac said after a bit. “I think I’m supposed to help you out somehow. Are you looking for a hero-for-hire?”

Zac speaking words they understood seemed to startle the group who stood in front of him, but the man with the scrolls soon regained his bearings.

“Greetings, Lord Champion, I am Dresdo, general of the East,” the man said. “We are on the edge of ruin and in desperation tried the summoning the Ancients mentioned.”



## MULTIPLE VARIABLES

It appeared the general was about to continue, but drums in the distance interrupted him. It sounded like a call to war, and Zac frowned and walked toward the source of the ruckus. The leaders of the Solvim hurriedly followed behind him as he walked up a hill to get a better vantage of the situation.

As soon as he reached the crest, he saw a sea of warriors neatly lined up a kilometer away from the army he apparently belonged to. Only a quick glance was needed to see that the armies weren't evenly matched, as the enemies outnumbered them at least twice over.

"These guys are your enemies?" Zac asked.

"Filthy opportunists," Dresdo spat. "They take advantage of our precarious situation, trying to mount a sneak attack while we are occupied."

Zac frowned as he listened to the general. He wasn't sure what to think about this situation. Judging by the sound of it, this wasn't some battle of good versus evil, but rather a war between two nations. He had no idea what the so-called precarious situation was; he didn't know if these aliens around him had committed some atrocities before, prompting the current response.

It put him into an ethical dilemma. Judging by the power of the troops around him, the other army couldn't be too strong either. Otherwise, they'd have already steamrolled the smaller troop. If he wanted to, he could simply wade into their

ranks and cause utter mayhem, destroying their ranks within the day.

But could he conscionably do that? What would that say about him? If he went through with this, he felt he'd be some scum who was okay with doing anything as long as it made him more powerful. It wouldn't be too different from starting to annihilate Ishiate or even human settlements just to gain experience.

Besides, it seemed too simple a scenario. Killing some weaklings wouldn't be much of a test, and Zac felt that the System wouldn't give him that easy a time. Was the challenge showing the resolve to actually do anything, including killing an army of sapients who had nothing to do with him, all in the pursuit of power?

“So what is the precarious situation you mentioned?” Zac asked, trying to get a clearer understanding of the situation.

The general looked a bit hesitant until he shrugged his shoulders. “A great beast has arrived in our kingdom. It's not something that we have ever encountered before. There are rumors that it's arrived from the great beyond. Its powers are believed to be in the fabled Ascended rank,” Dresdo said.

“Ascended rank?” Zac couldn't help asking.

“It has broken through the great barrier at level 75 and reached a higher stage of existence,” another of the aliens explained.

“The Royal Family of Orrin and many of our elites are currently occupied in fighting the beast, but it's an arduous process. These scum from the neighboring country saw our plight as an opportunity to break our bonds of friendship, not only ignoring our request for assistance but even attacking us,” the other Solvim angrily added from the side.

Zac perked up from the explanation, but he became a bit hesitant as he once again looked at the army stationed in the distance. Just what did the System want from him? Fighting an E-graded space-beast sounded much more like a trial, but if that was his job, why did he end up in front of the army



instead of the beast? Zac once again opened his quest screen to take a look at the quest to find some hints of what to do.

**First Step of Sovereignty (Unique, Limited): Enter the first trial within a month. Defeat the challenge. Reward: [Tower of Eternity] token, [F-grade Dao Treasure] (0/1)**

The line didn't update or give him any further hints after he'd arrived, leaving Zac perplexed. It was the first time a quest didn't explicitly say what he needed to do. Did that mean that he needed to figure it out himself, as it was part of the trial? Or did it mean that there were multiple ways to complete the quest?

Zac mulled over the options for a bit until he turned toward the general. "So, what goal did you have in mind when you summoned me?"

"Well... we hope that you can lead us into battle and destroy their army," the general said as he glared at the soldiers on the other side of the field.

"I thought as much," Zac said with a sigh.

Leading soldiers into battle wasn't something he was ready to do, as he still had no idea what he was doing. If it came to chopping, then he was their guy, but anything more complicated than that, he'd just embarrass himself.

In the end, Zac decided he would just have to follow his heart. He didn't feel right slaughtering an army that wasn't his enemy. From the sound of it, they might be in the wrong here, but Zac didn't feel it was his place to put his finger on the scale.

What he could do was go over and kill the beast. Not only would it save the lives of the citizens of the kingdom, it would also free up soldiers to push back the invaders, which meant that both objectives would be completed.

Besides, killing the beast should be the harder option and might even give him some extra benefits compared to killing a bunch of weak warriors. Something like a hidden reward. And even if that wasn't the case, it would still likely help him with

his work with upgrading his axe. He was approaching E-grade, and his weapon needed to match.

“So where is this beast?” Zac asked.

“It’s two days’ march to the south. It won’t interrupt the battle here,” Dresdo dutifully answered.

If it was two days by these people’s standards, Zac should be able to get there in under a day if he pushed it.

“Great, I’ll go kill the beast quickly. You just need to stall for two days,” Zac said as he turned away from the enemy army.

“Err, Champion, what are you doing?” the general said with alarm. “If you leave, we’ll be overrun within the day. They outnumber us three to one.”

That made Zac stop in his tracks. Just what would happen if this battle was lost while he was hunting the beast? Would he automatically fail? This quest was truly starting to become a pain in the ass, throwing so many variables at him. Zac turned around and immediately walked toward the enemy army.

“Wait, we should discuss a plan for this battle!” the alien shouted as he ran after him. “They have two full legions opposing us, and it consists of elites. May I ask, what level are you?”

“I’m level 60,” Zac answered with a shrug.

“What? Only level 60?” the Solvim said, disappointment flashing in his eyes as he stopped following. “That’s at the level of the great protector, but even he isn’t able to thwart an army on his own.”

“Level isn’t everything,” Zac said. “Don’t worry, things will work out. Wait here while I go talk with their leader.”

The general did as Zac said and stopped some distance from his own army lines, looking at the back of Zac. Of course, whether he stayed behind because he believed in Zac’s words or whether he didn’t want to get himself killed was another question.

The distance between the two armies wasn't too great, and soon Zac was only a hundred meters away from the enemy army, who warily looked at the approaching figure, their weapons at the ready. Zac tried to discern anything out of place, looking through the lines of soldiers.

But no matter where he looked, he couldn't see anything different. The opposing army was comprised of the same type of humanoids, and after repeatedly using his identification skill, he knew they were of roughly the same strength as well, mostly being between levels 15 and 30. It truly seemed there was no hidden trick to the army in front of him.

He quickly spotted an area with warriors more richly decked compared to the average soldiers, and using **[Inquisitive Eye]** found that there was one of them at level 44, matching the general from his side. Since he'd found his target, he started walking again.

"Halt!" one of the captains shouted at him, but Zac didn't care as he kept advancing.

The army wouldn't let Zac approach unimpeded, and a few deterring arrows sailed toward him. These kinds of attacks didn't have an effect on Zac anymore, and he didn't even bother activating his defensive skills, instead simply waving the attacks away as he unleashed his aura to the fullest.

"Fire at will!" the general immediately shouted with alarm after sensing the waves of power radiating from Zac.

The sky immediately blotted out with arrows heading straight toward him. If even a tenth of them hit, he'd be turned into a porcupine, but Zac wasn't worried. He simply kept walking toward the area where it seemed the leaders were stationed.

Waving away this number of arrows would take quite some effort, so he finally activated his defensive skill. Emerald leaves started to quickly whirl around him as though he stood in the center of a tornado, each leaf blocking tens of arrows before it disintegrated.

Not wanting to waste such a gift, Zac simply put the bundles of arrows into his pouch as they fell one by one, and in just a few short moments, he'd gathered over a thousand of them. It was clear that since the Cosmic Energy was so sparse in this world, a lot of attention and effort went into augmenting their strength with tools.

The arrows were of high quality, just like the gear he'd seen the soldiers wear, at least on the same level as those that were made in Port Atwood. They only lacked some inscriptions, after which they'd be fit to use by the Valkyries.

Initially, he considered farming arrows for a while but soon changed his mind. While none of the attacks individually was a threat to him, his Cosmic Energy was being depleted at a very quick rate due to the unceasing attacks.

He activated **[Loamwalker]**, and after just a few short steps, found himself in front of the general, who backed away in alarm.

“What are you? Why are you attacking us?” the general said with a shaky voice, barely able to stand straight due to the towering aura Zac emitted.

The surrounding soldiers were in far worse states, and everyone within twenty meters had simply fallen down unconscious. The other soldiers powerlessly looked on, not daring to attack anymore since their leaders were lying unconscious all around their assailant.

“You could say I've been hired by the Kingdom of Orrin to end this situation,” Zac said as he looked down on the general, purposely making his voice heard by the whole army. “I will go and kill that beast that is occupying a large part of their army now. I need your army to stand down for a week. After that, I don't care what you do.”

“And if we don't?” the general said.

“Then I'll go to your kingdom and kill your king, or whoever rules it, along with every high-level official and general you possess,” Zac said as he added the Dao of Heaviness to the aura he emitted.

Even the general couldn't stand after the addition of the Dao, and he plopped down to his knees, only staying somewhat upright as he held himself up by stabbing a sword into the ground with shaking hands.

"What happens after a week?" the general forced through clattering teeth.

"After a week, I don't care what you do. The beast will be dead, and it's up to your countries to decide what to do from there. I won't interfere," Zac said with a shrug.

"How do we know you won't turn and attack us anyway after dealing with the beast?"

In response, Zac only shook his head as he walked away. As he left the thick of the army, he kept channeling his Dao into his aura, which also made any errant arrow that was still shot at him powerlessly fall to the ground like they suddenly weighed a ton. An order to cease attacks was soon shouted by the general, letting Zac leave unaccosted.

"They won't attack you for a week. Don't attack them during this time either. I'll go kill that beast now," Zac said as he gave Dresdo a pat on his shoulder when he returned to his side.

The man didn't respond and only blankly stared at Zac like he was some mythological beast.

Sometimes it was a bit fun to play the demon lord.



## COMPETITION

Zac was quickly running through the countryside, idly gazing at the alien landscape as he passed it by. It was a weird feeling seeing both normal things like leafy trees, followed by sights that he couldn't even explain. An example was an enormous flying beast that slowly drifted overhead that reminded Zac more of a zeppelin than a bird.

At first, Zac had thought it was the monster he was supposed to kill, but after using **[Inquisitive Eyes]** on it, he realized it was only level 18. More interestingly, he even spotted a small cottage on top of the animal with his binoculars as it flew away. He didn't think this was what the astronauts at NASA were imagining when they talked about space exploration.

He was surprised to note that the planet seemed to be in a state of perpetual gloom with barely any light to brighten the scenery. There was a sun in the sky, but it was so small and ineffectual that it almost might as well have been another star in distant space.

However, the weak light didn't seem to have had an overly severe impact on the flora of the world, as he passed both farms full of crops and healthy forests as he sped through the country. Zac was guessing that while the energy in the atmosphere was sparse, it was enough to nurture normal unranked growth across the planet.

It made him wonder what would happen if the energy got any worse. Would the planet and its citizens simply die out?

Was he walking on the dying carcass of a planet, or simply one that had always worked differently from how he was used to?

Still, all this wasn't any of his business. He couldn't get invested in some world that was placed god-knows-where. He simply kept his head down and kept running, every now and again stopping to ask for directions. Of course, every time he did so, he caused widespread panic, as the general population was not aware of their army summoning some strange giant.

It was quite clear that this wasn't a planet that often saw visitors from outer space, even though it was integrated into the Multiverse. Then again, that was usually the case, as there simply were too many planets for the large forces to bother with all the small and worthless ones.

A planet of this level generally didn't have the means for intergalactic teleportation, which meant the hassle of actually traveling here outweighed any value that could be squeezed out of the planet.

It turned out he had overestimated the distance to his target, as it only took him around ten hours to reach his goal. At least he was pretty sure he'd reached his goal. In front of him, a large medieval city stood surrounded by an army far larger than the one he'd been summoned to. A rough estimation put them at over ten thousand men, though there could be even more of them on the opposite side of the city.

The city itself was fortified by a wall that was mostly unscathed except for a large breach that was around ten meters wide. Initially, it looked like a siege was taking place, but Zac knew that wasn't the case.

A large crash could be heard from inside the town, followed by an angry bellow that reverberated out into the countryside. The beast was inside, causing chaos and widespread damage. The army wasn't besieging the town, but rather guarding it to keep the beast trapped, not wanting to release it out into the wild.

More surprisingly, it seemed that the army was utilizing either an array or a War Array to cast a huge shield that sealed the whole town. Zac hadn't expected to see techniques like



that from this energy-starved world, where the armies seemed to exclusively consist of physical classes.

He knew just how expensive running arrays were, and he couldn't imagine that there were Nexus Crystals aplenty on the planet. The country of Orrin was expending a huge amount of resources to seal the town and the beast.

Still, this wasn't a long-term solution. The beast was running rampant inside, causing widespread destruction. Structures kept getting smashed, but Zac was unable to get a good look at its shape due to the walls. However, he knew the beast was at least as large as a Fiend Wolf, as he still caught glimpses of something black above the wall.

Zac wondered just what the plan was as he approached the army from behind. He could clearly hear the beast rampaging inside, but the soldiers just stood outside waiting. He didn't know what they were waiting for, but it worked out fine for him.

The appearance of a human caused quite a bit of commotion among the ranks of the Solvim warriors, and they scrambled to set up a defensive front. Zac stopped for a bit, pondering what to do next. Technically, he was on the side of these people, so he didn't want to risk ruining his quest by forcing himself through.

"Greetings, traveler, I am Perav. What has brought you to the Kingdom of Orrin?" a strong voice sounded as an elderly-looking male quickly approached, followed by a few younger warriors.

"I was summoned to your world by Dresdo. I have come to kill that thing you've trapped inside," Zac said, pointing toward the town.

The faces of the warriors who heard the conversation underwent a flurry of emotions, ranging from disbelief to elation. However, the leader who spoke with him and a few of the warriors who accompanied him were more measured in their response.

“You are a champion summoned through the ancient ritual?” the old man said, looking a bit perplexed.

“I guess,” Zac answered with a shrug. “Can I enter now?”

“Please go ahead, Champion. We are grateful for you heeding the call. Be careful; the beast is a formidable foe,” the old man said.

Zac only nodded and proceeded through the ranks, who quickly opened a path for him that led to the breach in the wall. Before entering, he stopped next to the array, and as he touched the shield, Zac noticed it felt similar to the one he possessed in Port Atwood.

It was one-directional, meaning he would be able to pass through it from one side, but as soon as he entered, he would be trapped inside. He would either have to kill the beast or break through the shield to get out if he found himself outmatched by the beast.

The old man was both respectful and didn't seem to contain any hidden killing intent toward him, but Zac still didn't like the feeling of being trapped like he was entering the Thunderdome. Still, even though the shield was maintained by thousands of warriors, he felt confident that he could cause a breach if he truly needed to escape.

If he combined both his new skill and **[Nature's Punishment]**, he would be able to exact an enormous amount of force, and nothing these Solvim threw at him should be able to impede that amount of power. So Zac simply took a deep breath as he steadily walked through the barrier.

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The king of the Kingdom of Orrin silently gazed at the back of the alien warrior until he turned a corner and disappeared from sight.

“Father, what's going on?” one of the richly equipped warriors next to the old man asked. “I thought that the

summoning circle didn't work? Haven't we tried it on multiple occasions in history?"

"I am not sure," Perav said with a sigh. "But he is the first off-worlder to come to our dying planet in eons. If he wants to fight that beast, let him. Our plan would sacrifice so many lives to ensure success. If he can solve our problems, we are in his debt."

"And then what?" the man probed. "The alchemists say the horn of the beast might be the key for one of us to ascend."

Perav sighed and shook his head. He knew how important it was to create an ascender. It was the first, and hardest, step in being accepted into the fold of the immortals. If their ascender then managed to come into the good graces of some Venerable, their whole planet might be revitalized.

"We cannot afford to offend an off-worlder. For one, he dares fight an ascended beast alone, and secondly, we do not know what kind of force he belongs to. You cannot imagine the power of some of the warriors of the great beyond. They could level our whole kingdom with a wave of their hands," the old man answered. "Who knows, he might be just the person who can save our planet."

The younger warrior didn't say anything, but only wistfully looked up at the stars.

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It wasn't very hard for Zac to locate the beast. It was going berserk in the town, pummeling through one building after another. Initially, he had been a bit disgusted by the army, as it seemed that they had locked their citizens inside along with the beasts.

But as he walked toward the beast, the streets were completely desolate, telling of an earlier evacuation. He tried to walk as quietly as possible as he got close, as he still hadn't seen the full form of the monster.

While the energy contained in the bellow earlier made it seem that the monster couldn't have evolved too long ago, he wouldn't take any unnecessary risks. If there was one thing that Alyn had made sure he understood, it was to never take anything for granted. There were myriad beasts in the Multiverse, many of which possessed weird and unpredictable attacks.

Finally, he got close enough to see it around a corner, as it had briefly stopped after destroying a large mansion. This close, there was no question about it. The beast was truly E-grade, but recently evolved. As for the type of beast it was, Zac had no idea, as he didn't dare to use his identifying skill on it just yet.

At first, Zac had thought it was a huge rhinoceros, but he soon realized that he was slightly off on that point. Upon further scrutiny, it felt like the beast was the result of a mutant bison ox mating with a unicorn. Its back reached roughly four meters in the air, and it had a stocky build covered with thick black fur.

Just looking at its body, Zac felt that its method of fighting should be somewhat similar to that of the barghest. The thing looked like it was built for devastating head-on charges. However, the huge muscles weren't what gave Zac pause as he scouted the beast.

It was the huge horn that shot out of its forehead, reaching over three meters. It almost looked like the horn was made out of opal, as it was white and shimmered in a rainbow of colors. However, the colors weren't refractions, but rather wild energies that were somehow trapped inside.

Just looking at the sharp horn from a distance was enough to fill Zac with some trepidation, and he had a feeling it wasn't so simple that it was only used for stabbing. However, since the beast looked a bit unwieldy, Zac felt confident he would be able to whittle the beast down while avoiding frontal attacks with the help of **[Loamwalker]**.

But before he could put thoughts into action, a blaring sense of danger entered his mind, and he unhesitatingly

activated a defensive charge from his robes. Not only that, but he also immediately used his defensive skill and had multiple layers of leaves superimposed in the direction he sensed the deadly danger.

The next instant, a gloved fist came crashing at him, causing a sonic boom right before it slammed into the shield. The fist contained some sort of intractable force, and Zac immediately realized it was some sort of Dao. He didn't want to risk facing the same situation as with the Corpse Lord, being afflicted with an unknown Dao, so he quickly rotated the Dao of Trees in his body as well in order to create a third layer of defense.

Zac's eyes widened in alarm as the shield cracked like brittle glass, and the emerald leaves were ripped to shreds soon after. The only thing he could do was use his arm as a shield, tightening his muscles while using his Dao for all he was worth.

The ground was ripped to shreds when the fist landed, and Zac was shot away like a cannonball, completely destroying a building from the impact. Stars swam in his eyes, but he quickly refocused, ripping away the debris of the building on top of him, and scrambled up to his feet.

His arm hurt like hell, but after a quick check, he was relieved to feel that it wasn't broken. He immediately summoned his axe and faced his new assailant with a grim face. When he saw who had punched him, he completely blanked out for a second, as it wasn't some hidden powerhouse of the small aliens, as he'd expected.

It was a young human, likely around Emily's age. At least Zac assumed that he was human, though he'd never seen anyone with purple hair before. The youth was seemingly unarmed apart from the gloves and large bracers he wore.

The two angrily stared at each other for a few seconds until they both spoke up at the same time.

“Who the hell are you?”

“Why the fuck did you attack me?”



## AVERAGE

The youth was decked in a pair of loose pants lined with intricate fractals and a sleeveless vest that went all the way up to his throat, leaving both his arms bare. His body was of the wiry kind, like something that made Zac think of kung fu masters rather than bodybuilders, but Zac knew only too well just how much power was contained in his arms.

Just as Zac scouted out the new variable entering the fray, so did the teenager hesitantly look over Zac. Soon after, Zac felt the fractal from **[Mental Fortress]** flash, meaning he was getting probed or attacked by a mental skill. Looking at his opponent, Zac guessed it was the former.

“Why aren’t you answering? Just who are you? Did my siblings send you?” he angrily said, warily keeping his distance from Zac after his sneak attack failed.

Zac ignored the question, instead quickly using his skill **[Inquisitive Eye]** just like the other guy did. But for the first time since he’d acquired it, it almost failed completely, giving even less information than when he scanned his sister.

A muddled row could be seen, only telling Zac the name of the enemy. If even that. Because the only thing that was legible was “Average,” with the rest being blocked. That meant one of two things. Either there was a huge disparity in Intelligence or Wisdom, or he possessed far superior means to block mental attacks. In either case, it indicated that he wasn’t a simple opponent.

Zac soon got his answers, as one of the teenager's bracelets shone with a white luster that reminded Zac of the diadem Ogras used to protect from mental attacks. The teenager started and looked down at his arm, immediately raising his guard afterward.

“Average? Is that really your name? I don't know who you are, much less anything about any siblings of yours. Why did you attack me when I was about to fight that beast? Are you the one that unleashed it on these people?” Zac asked, taking note of every move with vigilance.

He couldn't be completely sure, but it felt like the teenager was roughly as strong as he was. Not only did he move like a lightning bolt, but there was also enough strength behind his punch to hurt him. There also was the issue of the mysterious power contained in the punch, and Zac not being able to identify it properly was a bit unnerving.

“I knew you were a liar! Everyone in this sector knows who I am. Who else dares to have hair this stylish? Only I, the great Average—” the teenager angrily said, but his introduction was rudely interrupted by the bellow of the frenzied beast.

There was no way the demon bull hadn't been alerted by the commotion the two caused. It had barely restrained itself due to the enormous amounts of energy released from the strike of the teenager. But after observing the two small humans for a bit longer, it apparently felt confident in attacking.

To Zac's surprise, the teenager didn't seem alarmed but rather elated that the beast was bearing down on him. The air around his fists started shimmering like stars as it distorted from dense energy gathering, and he actually seemed ready to meet the charge from the beast head-on.

Zac had a decent idea of what the brat was about to do, and he felt he couldn't allow him to attack the beast. This so-called Average had muddied the water of his quest completely. Did the System expect this kid to be here? Was he the real challenge?



All these variables cropping up were a pain in the ass, but Zac could only keep fighting for now. He instantly swung his axe toward the teenager, and as the edge sliced through the air, a huge fractal edge from **[Chop]** appeared. After a brief hesitation, he also imbued the strike with the Dao of Sharpness before launching it at the human rather than the beast.

Zac was afraid that the kid would simply shrug off the attack if he didn't put something extra in the strike, and he couldn't let the teenager kill the beast. He had a strong feeling that his mission would be a wash if he just watched someone else claim the head of the bison monster.

The fractal edge flew at the pugilist with full force, slicing the cobblestones on the ground to ribbons on its approach. Average clearly had good battle awareness and immediately noticed an attack was incoming. However, even with the knowledge, his eyes widened in alarm at the huge size of the incoming attack, and he threw himself down on the ground in order to avoid the attack that wanted to slice him in two.

To Zac's surprise, Average moved like an acrobat, pushing off from the ground with his hands, and flew up toward the head of the charging beast.

"I knew it! You work for eleventh brother, don't you!" the teenager screamed angrily as he kicked the beast with enormous force. "He always does things like this!"

Due to Zac's strike, Average was out of balance and couldn't properly utilize that dense energy that he had gathered in his fists, and the pugilist only managed to transfer some of it to his feet in time. But the effect still shocked Zac. It sounded like a bomb went off as the foot slammed into the side of the beast's head.

Even though the attack had been interrupted, there was just as much force in it compared with the sneak attack the teenager used against him, and Zac made a note to be wary when that odd energy appeared again. The bison was actually lifted up in the air and thrown into a neighboring building as well with a wail.

Initially, Zac was worried that the strike had actually killed the beast, but he soon realized more was needed to kill a true E-grade creature, as it got up to its feet with a shake of its head. This time, it didn't mindlessly charge again, and instead kept its distance as it emitted a low growl.

Since the beast looked a bit groggy, Zac took the opportunity to scout it out and tried his luck with his ocular skill.

### **[Moonpike – Star Ox – Level 79 – Strength]**

The skill actually worked this time, and it gave a brief rundown of the animal. The level and its main attribute weren't a surprise, but what made Zac a bit confused was the first two lines of information. It had a name. Did it mean that the ox was intelligent enough for the System to consider it a cultivator? Or perhaps it only meant that the animal had an owner that had named it, like the heralds he had fought earlier.

Average landed a bit haphazardly, angrily glaring back and forth between his two enemies. He seemed to want to say something else to Zac, who simply shrugged his shoulders in response.

"I don't know anything about your family circumstances. But I cannot let you claim the kill of that beast, even if we have to fight over it," Zac evenly said, completely unleashing his aura.

"What the fuck! I can give you the corpse, but I need to be the one to kill it," Average angrily shouted back, seemingly shocked that someone didn't let him have his way.

"No deal," Zac said with a shake of his head.

"You rogue cultivators are goddamn lunatics. A thousand E-grade Nexus Coins! That's over ten times the value of the horn. Leave me alone and it's yours," he said, not being able to hide an air of superiority.

That actually made Zac stop for a second. A thousand E-grade Nexus Coins were equivalent to a billion normal Nexus Coins. That was far more than the total wealth he had

accumulated so far. Perhaps it was worth failing the quest for that amount of money.

He soon steadied his mind, though. Failing the quest wasn't so simple as to only lose a Dao Treasure and an entrance ticket to the Tower of Eternity. It would also mean losing access to all future quests in the chain, and all the rewards they would bring. And a quest chain called the Path to Sovereignty surely wasn't something simple.

"I am sorry, but I have an important quest to kill this beast. I have nothing against you, but you need to back off from this one," Zac steadily said.

"You think I'm afraid of you? I know you haven't evolved, and I can count the worthy rivals to me in the F-grade in this star system on my hands, and you are not one of them. I offered you a peaceful solution, but you wouldn't have it," Average said, cracking his neck while glaring at Zac.

A monstrous aura erupted from the youth as well, almost matching that of Zac's. It was as though the two forces fought for supremacy in the air.

By this point, the beast had gotten back on its feet, and it warily growled as it watched the youth. It clearly didn't want to eat another of those monstrous strikes, and instead leveled its gaze on Zac. With a roar, it charged at Zac, who frowned as he glanced over at the incoming animal.

Torrential amounts of killing intent, garnered from killing hundreds of thousands of beasts, poured out of Zac on top of his normal aura, and the beast quickly stopped in its tracks. It was as though it had seen an apex predator who wanted to feed on it, and it didn't dare fight Zac either.

Instead, the beast seemed to have had enough of the situation and started to slowly back away from the two, careful not to make any hasty movements. Zac knew it was stuck inside the town for now and didn't mind its actions. The youth warily stepped back a bit as well due to the killing intent, some hesitation finally appearing on his face.

“Are you an unorthodox cultivator? Are you from outside the Empire?” he grunted.

“Unorthodox cultivator? I don’t even know what that means,” Zac said with a shrug, which seemed to calm down the youth a bit. “Winner gets the beast.”

“Good!” the pugilist said, and immediately disappeared after.

This time, Zac was ready and, after sensing the changes in the surroundings, quickly swirled around and swung his axe straight down in a tremendous swing. A grating sound could be heard when the edge of the axe was deflected with the help of one of the bracers on Average’s forearm, and immediately after a knee came flying toward Zac’s gut.

Zac angled his body to avoid the blow, immediately trying to ram his shoulder into the chest of the youth afterward. However, a lightning-quick jab to his jaw stopped him in his tracks, forcing him to back away. With a grunt, Zac shook his head, immediately getting back in the thick of it.

Both of them wordlessly agreed not to use any of their skills, as whoever won had to fight the beast afterward. Unfortunately, Zac quickly realized that the situation wasn’t really in his favor. Clearly, his enemy had great combat experience, likely having trained in hand-to-hand battles since he was young.

With an angry glare, Zac refused to give up and stubbornly kept going, trying every trick he had learned from his Axe Mastery skill and his countless battles. After having fought a while, Zac felt that the two were quite close in at least Dexterity and Strength, though Zac guessed that Average had a closer balance of the two attributes compared to Zac’s two-to-one ratio.

At least Zac had a feeling his Endurance and Vitality were a notch above the teenager’s, as the youth didn’t dare use his body to block Zac’s punches and swings. He wasn’t like the Corpse-lord, whose body had turned into a defensive treasure, in other words.

Instead, the teenager mostly used deft movements or his magical bracers to avoid taking any direct damage from Zac's various attacks. Zac himself was continuously hit with powerful punches and kicks, and he knew he'd be black and blue come tomorrow.

Initially, Zac's goal was to break those bracers so that the kid would be forced to give up, but he soon realized his folly in that plan. The bronze hoops around his forearms were clearly high-grade treasures, likely far better than anything Zac possessed. Even after having intercepted tens of swings from **[Verun's Bite]**, there wasn't a single mark on them, though Average's arms were shaking a bit.

Zac's body was getting beaten like a slab of meat, and he had a feeling he would pass out before Average ran out of steam. The pugilist was like a machine, continuously launching forceful attacks that made Zac wince. The fight had actually lasted less than a minute, but Zac was already starting to feel woozy.

Though the two only used their bodies to fight, they caused widespread destruction in the town, pushing through the buildings like two intertwined tornadoes. He knew he needed to do something to change the situation quickly.

Besides, he didn't want to let the beast roam freely too long. Perhaps it would actually manage to break through the array given enough time. Then he and the brat would truly look like fools.

Zac even started contemplating using **[Hatchetman's Rage]** to subdue the kid, but he was afraid that would escalate the situation into a true life-and-death battle. Normally, he wouldn't shrink away from that, but he felt the situation wasn't as simple as two people fighting for some treasure.

Average, in spite of his name, seemed to come from a truly powerful faction from the small pieces of information that could be gleaned from what he had said earlier. And they weren't on Earth anymore, where tools and other items were a bit limited. Since he could throw out a billion Nexus Coins

like nothing, he likely had some supreme defensive treasures, so an all-out fight would probably backfire on Zac instead.

Fortuitously, Zac soon caught on to a small hint. Every time the youth dodged one of the brutal swings of his axe, there was a brief hint of fear in his eyes. Between what Average had said earlier and his lack of real life-and-death experience, it wasn't too hard to figure out what was going on.

The teenager was a greenhouse elite. He was given all kinds of advantages to boost his attributes, and trained in combat with great instructors. But he was still young, and his power didn't come from numerous bloody battles. He let his fear of being seriously hurt or killed affect him somewhat.

Since he had nothing to lose, Zac decided to try a gambit. After blocking another punch with his arm, Zac swung his axe overhead straight at the youth's head, intentionally leaking some killing intent. It was a huge swing that would no doubt kill the teenager if it hit, but there was no way such a wide swing would go unpunished.

As Zac expected, a lightning kick slammed into his wide-open side, causing a few ribs to crack. Zac groaned and dropped the axe, causing the eyes of the teenager to widen in elation. However, the next moment the now freed hand closed around the leg of the pugilist.

There was no dodging any longer as Zac held one of his enemy's legs in an iron vise, which brought the two to a state of mutual destruction. Average wouldn't give up and engaged Zac in a brutal close-combat melee. For every strike Zac managed to land on the locked-down teenager, he received two in return.

But Zac simply soaked up the damage with a stone-cold face, his eyes boring straight into the increasingly frantic eyes of the teenager. The strikes between the two sounded like continuous thunder throughout the town as knuckles met flesh. This kept going for a while until Zac was about to land his fifth strike in the face of Average, whose left eye was closed shut and his nose crooked.

Suddenly, a red shield sprang up and blocked Zac's strike.

“Shit! I give up!”





## STAR OX

After taking a look at the swollen face of Average for a few seconds, Zac let go of his opponent's leg and slowly got to his feet.

“So the ox is mine, right? No interference?” Zac said after spitting out a mouthful of blood and cracking his neck.

It felt like every part of his body was swollen and pulsating, but he had work to do. He simply took out a healing pill and swallowed it to manage the pain.

“I've been called many things in my life. Handsome, generous, dashing. But never a liar,” Average said as he got to his feet as well. “Besides, we have hundreds of Star Oxen back in one of our Mystic Realms. What do I care about this one?”

“Then why the hell did you make this such a pain in the ass for me?” Zac angrily said.

“Dad told me to find and kill this one, and if I did it, he'd consider letting me change my name,” the youth admitted, looking a bit embarrassed.

“Your name is actually Average? I thought it was some method you used to block your real name,” Zac said, not being able to stop a snort.

Average glared at Zac for a bit before he deflated.

“It's my crazy dad. He said he wanted to see if a bad name would spur a child to improve faster. ‘Strength through embarrassment,’ he called it. More importantly, do you truly not know who I am?” he said, a bit curious.

“No idea. I’ll go kill that bull now. Just stay out of the way,” Zac said.

“See if I care when it stabs you in the ass,” the teenager muttered, but followed Zac’s word and sat down after eating a pill.

Zac only shook his head and headed toward where the beast had slunk away. While he knew he wasn’t the best discernor of people, he felt that Average wasn’t lying. He wouldn’t likely interfere in the fight. Of course, Zac would still keep an eye open just in case.

It didn’t take long for Zac to find it, as it was currently dismantling the wall on the opposite side of the town. Large pieces of rocks were flying as it pierced the wall over and over, the rocks seeming like butter to the large horn.

Its senses were quite sharp, and it somehow noticed Zac’s approach from behind almost immediately. As though it felt pushed into a corner, the ox bellowed and stomped the ground threateningly, its feet causing small earthquakes in the ground. Zac warily looked the beast over, not in a rush to make a move.

He had a feeling there was something special about the animal. He’d already killed an E-grade beast before, and that was when he was far weaker compared to now. Of course, that had been a desperate battle, but still, he didn’t think this would be a walk in the park.

But just looking at the beast didn’t tell him anything apart from reinforcing the notion that something likely was up with the horn, which crackled with wild energies. He summoned a large edge with **[Chop]** and the next moment disappeared.

Immediately after he appeared beneath its torso, the edge soaring up toward its stomach. Zac had already imbued his strike with the Dao of Sharpness. It was this very combination that had cleaved the Fiend Wolf in two, and it was a good measure to test the bison.

The edge slammed into the thick hide, but Zac was disappointed to find that apart from a few long strands of fur

being cut, there seemed to be no effect from the swing. It didn't even manage to penetrate the skin.

It wasn't that the beast had an impenetrable skin, but rather it felt like there was a strong energy blocking the edge to cut through. Zac couldn't be sure, but he guessed that the Dao of Hardness should have properties that worked a bit like this.

The beast angrily roared, and it appeared it felt truly afraid as torrential amounts of Cosmic Energy whirled about. It was planning something big, and Zac wasn't sure what he should do, so for now, he kept swinging. He tried to hit various body parts with his edge, this time after swapping over to the Dao of Heaviness.

The kick of Average seemed to have had an effect, so he instead went with blunt-force damage. He focused on the joints of the beast, trying to immobilize it, but he simply wasn't able to breach its defenses with **[Chop]**.

Suddenly, a sense of danger enveloped him, and he quickly backed away from the beast with his movement skill, only to see the bison simply plop down on the ground, causing the ground to shake. It felt like a weird decision for the beast, but admittedly, it had managed to force Zac away.

However, the next moment, Zac's brows rose as the horn started to shine with blinding light as it was leveled toward him. Acute danger flooded Zac's mind as he quickly scampered out of the way, pushing his movement skill to the limit.

A blazing pillar of light ripped through the position where he'd just been, like a prismatic laser that destroyed anything in its path. The attack was instantaneous, and if it weren't for his high Luck, he would have been turned into motes of light by now. Zac couldn't even see where the beam ended, as everything it hit was completely disintegrated as far as he could see.

Alarmed, Zac finally realized why the Cosmic Energy had surged so much earlier. He really didn't want to let it fire another of those devastating attacks, as he held no delusions that he'd walk away from one of those beams. This time, he

was able to get out of the way in time, but there was no telling if it could move the beam as well.

But just as Zac was about to charge toward the bison once more, it was surrounded by large motes of multicolored lights, floating about all around it. Zac frowned and took out a stone from his pouch, immediately throwing it at one of them.

An intense explosion erupted from the light, containing enough force to throw Zac on his back, even in the distance. His cracked ribs, courtesy of Average, made themselves known as he slammed down on the ground.

The mote of light exploding wasn't the end of it. It also caused a cascading effect amongst the neighboring stars, causing a concussive explosion blanketing a whole area. Even if he'd managed to avoid the first blast somehow in melee range, the other ones would have surely hit him.

Zac quickly crawled up on his feet again and spat out some gravel from his mouth as he surveyed the scene. The bison was a real cheat. It had essentially set itself up like a cannon, repositioning itself as Zac tried to move around it. Furthermore, to avoid being assaulted, it summoned moving mines all around it, each containing enough force to hurt him.

Even worse, it looked like the animal was able to control the motes, meaning he couldn't simply dodge them, as they would follow him anyway. As soon as the area calmed down, some of the remaining motes quickly drifted over, along with a few new ones appearing in short order. It took less than five seconds before the minefield had once again been reinforced.

The only good news was that it still hadn't fired off a second shot from its horn, meaning it likely took a while to charge up to its full effect.

Zac didn't relish the thought of pulling out his aces at the moment, as Average was still around. Zac honestly didn't believe that the teenager would do something at this juncture, but he didn't want to take any unnecessary risks.

But something needed to be done, as the horn was gaining brightness at a steady pace. He looked down on his forearm

and steadied his breath. The Cosmic Energy in the area surged as Zac activated his newly acquired skill, **[Hatchetman's Rage]**.

Boundless power coursed through his veins, and he had to suppress an urge to simply charge at the beast, waving his axe like a madman. He felt like an agent of destruction, but he forcefully steadied his mind and started to pour torrential amounts of it into his forearm, starting the charge of his own ace.

However, that wasn't all, since he also summoned five enormous blades with **[Chop]**, each almost ten meters long. As soon as the charge was almost done, Zac let loose a roar and released one fractal blade after another at the minefield the beast had created.

The world turned white from hundreds of explosions going off in quick succession. This time, Zac was ready and dug his heels in and summoned **[Nature's Barrier]** to withstand the shock waves.

He was almost blinded by the cascading explosions, with lights swimming in his vision. A loud ringing rang in his ears as well, and it felt like he was under the effect of a flash-bang grenade. However, he had accomplished his task, so he pushed his hand forward with a growl.

Reality cracked and the hand emerged, empowered by the Dao of Trees. A few things were different about it this time. First of all, it emitted a much stronger aura than before, and Zac attributed it to the increase in stats from **[Hatchetman's Rage]**.

But more interestingly, the wooden arm contained red shining veins that coursed through the whole thing. It looked a bit sinister, but Zac didn't have time to analyze it as he commanded the hand forward toward the sitting bison.

A few motes were spawned in the path of the hand and exploded on impact. Luckily, the hand was imbued with the Dao of Trees, and only some scorch marks remained after the hit. It might have been a different story if tens of the motes detonated on it, but Zac had already cleared most of them out.

However, Zac didn't feel relieved, as his danger sense kept building as the horn of the bison was nearing the same level of blinding brightness as when it had fired its last shot. This time, it was quickly swiveling its head back and forth in the direction of Zac, likely aiming to destroy a wider area.

Time was running out, and Zac did the only thing he could think of. The huge wooden hand closed the last distance and gripped the huge horn. Searing heat was transferred from the wooden hand to Zac's, but the feeling was nothing new to him.

Zac aimed to push its head to the side to avoid the incoming laser, but he had underestimated the power of his skill. An extremely loud snap echoed through the area, followed by a high-pitched screech as the horn was broken off.

Zac was shocked but wouldn't let the opportunity pass, as there still was some time left on his skill before it ran out of steam. He pivoted the hand, and with all the remaining force he could muster, he drove the huge horn straight into the body of the bison.

A huge fountain of blood shot straight up in the sky as the animal essentially was impaled on its own body part. It let out a last desolate bellow before it stopped moving forever, its death infusing Zac with a huge amount of Cosmic Energy, bringing him clear to level 61.

The remaining floating mines in the vicinity soon disappeared, turning into a dense amount of Cosmic Energy that spread through the town. It allowed Zac clear passage as he slowly walked over to the corpse, the adrenaline from the fight quickly turning to tiredness all over.

The axe in his hand started to gleefully vibrate as he got next to the bison, and Zac dutifully placed its edge at the still bleeding wound of the animal. A good deal of blood entered the axe, and Zac almost thought that he could hear a happy purr from inside it.

Not long after, the effects of [**Hatchetman's Rage**] ended, and he was overcome with a wave of tiredness. Between his two fights and using both his aces, he just wanted to curl up

and sleep, but he wouldn't lose his battle readiness until he felt he was in a safe place.

"Wow, that was pretty crazy," a voice came from behind him, making Zac straighten his back and turn around, hoping that his weakness couldn't be discerned.

It was unsurprisingly Average, who likely had spectated the battle from somewhere close by. The fact that he had stayed away from the battle from start to end somewhat proved to Zac that the youth might be a bit spoiled, but he was true to his word. There was a moment of opportunity to steal the kill after the animal was impaled, but Average didn't take it.

He also couldn't sense any danger, so Zac didn't mind him approaching.

"I didn't expect it to have such strong attacks, so I might have gone a bit overboard," Zac said as he ripped the huge horn out of the bison and put it in a pouch.

"Star Ox are pretty well known for their star beam. Ahh, I'm so unlucky! If you hadn't gotten lucky and caught my leg, I would have been the one to rip the horn off and stab the animal," Average said with a sigh as he prodded the corpse of the Star Ox.

"Luck had nothing to do with it," Zac said with a shrug as he stored away the beast carcass as well. "In a hundred sparring duels, you would probably defeat me in most of them, but in a real battle, I would always be the one to walk away. You lack life-and-death experience."

Average frowned and looked like he was about to argue with him, but was interrupted before he could start anything.

"Ha ha, well spoken, brat!" a rough and extremely loud voice suddenly echoed through the town, making Zac warily look in all directions.

The fact that someone else was in the town without either of the two of them noticing wasn't a great sign, giving Zac a sinking feeling.

That feeling only amplified when he noticed the abject horror on Average's face.





## GREATEST

The teenager clearly knew the origin of the voice, and he obviously wasn't happy to hear it. Zac warily took out his axe once again, trying to figure out means to escape.

He truly wasn't in a condition to fight with someone who made Average this afraid. However, he soon realized the folly of any thoughts of escape as a pressure that felt unlike anything he'd ever felt before blanketed the whole town.

The next moment, a man who looked to be in his forties appeared next to Average as if out of nowhere. He wore similar gear to the teenager's, but comparing the two was as though comparing a matchstick fire to the sun. Zac knew the true aura of the man was restrained, but he barely was able to stand up just from being in his proximity.

This was a true old monster, someone far above anything he'd encountered so far, even eclipsing his realm of understanding. The only thing that had felt similar before was when he saw the axe-man in the vision, though the man in front of him likely wasn't quite that powerful.

But there was a big difference between seeing something in a vision and with his real eyes.

The pugilists were clearly related, as they shared the same weird hair and many facial features. It didn't feel like a mystery to Zac; the man was Average's father. The dad's build was quite a bit bulkier, but there wasn't a shred of fat on his body. It was also clear that this man was no greenhouse elite like his son.

His whole body was crisscrossed with scars, much like Zac's own body looked by now. But more importantly, he radiated a killing intent that felt strong enough to drown the whole planet they stood on, and it was on a completely different scale compared to his own.

Zac wondered just how much slaughter one had to undergo to passively emit such an aura. If someone had told him that this man had destroyed a whole planet, he honestly would believe them.

“Brat, why don't you look happy to see your father? And you're even calling me crazy?” the man said as he flicked Average on his forehead.

However, the power in that love tap was enough to blast Average into a house, just like what had happened to Zac when he got punched. But Average seemed fine apart from a quickly growing bump, and quickly scrambled out of the ruins of the house, albeit with some complaint on his face.

“What father? You're just a clone,” Average muttered, brushing some dust from his vest.

“Shitty son, it's still a wisp of my consciousness inside, no?”

Zac was shocked at that exchange. The monstrously powerful man was just a clone of the real thing. He already knew from Alyn that clones created with cloning skills or arrays were far weaker than the original body. To be this powerful with only a small part of the original's body's power – just who were these people?

“And what was that embarrassing display earlier? I trained you for over a decade to be fearless and indomitable, yet you gave up after only a broken nose. Next time, you'd better lose a couple of limbs before you give up.” The man snorted and finally turned toward Zac.

“Not bad for a little progenitor; you show promise. I'm guessing you're here on a quest?”

Zac was still a bit shell-shocked from the aura the man emitted, but he forced himself to snap out of it. He didn't dare

lie in front of this man. Somehow he knew Zac was a progenitor, and who knew what else he'd gleaned. Zac wouldn't be surprised if the man used some high-tier observation skills that [**Mental Barrier**] didn't even notice.

"I am Zachary Atwood. It's nice to meet you. May I ask how you knew I was a progenitor?" Zac tentatively said to him.

"This old man has been around for eighty thousand years. If I couldn't see through some little brat, I might as well throw myself into a sun." He laughed. "I am Greatest, by the way, Average's father. And don't worry, your quest is probably completed. I'm simply shielding the area for a bit so we could talk without you getting whisked away."

Zac's mind moved a mile a minute as he tried to unpack the various things the man said. First of all, Zac understood where he got the naming sense, and he could only throw a pitying glance at Average, who only rolled his eyes in response.

The next shocker was his age, as anyone that old had to be at least C-grade race as far as Zac knew. That, in turn, meant that the man in front of him was at least a D-grade powerhouse. However, Zac had a feeling he wasn't that simple.

He had no proper frame of reference yet of the powerhouses of the Multiverse, but Zac would guess that the man in front of him was stronger than D-grade, or at least at the very summit of the grade. This was only reinforced by the last comment. It appeared that the man was able to shield the area from the System.

He already knew that it was possible to manipulate the System to a certain degree, as stronger forces were somehow able to snag the incursion slots that were supposed to be randomly awarded. But he'd never heard about this type of manipulation.

It was extremely alarming, as it meant that it was possible that the man in front of him, or people of similar power, could lock down space around themselves. That would mean that

using things like Coward's Escape or teleporters might be useless when fleeing from powerhouses.

"You gave my son a valuable lesson, so I'll help you out in return. Wear this until you're as powerful as me," the man said.

The next moment, something appeared out of nowhere in front of Zac, and he hesitantly took it. It was a bracelet that looked like those the two pugilists wore. Zac didn't hesitate and quickly put it on. He didn't believe there was any malice behind the move. If Greatest wanted to kill him, he would already be dead.

*"The Specialty Core you've managed to grow is pretty impressive. It might bring about a miracle if it doesn't kill you first. Many wouldn't even hesitate in cutting you open just to study it. This little trinket will hide it from the world, and at least no one in D-grade will be able to sense it," the man's voice sounded in Zac's mind.*

Zac was truly alarmed this time. It was as though Greatest could see through everything about him. Not only that, he seemed to understand what the core was and called it a Specialty Core. Unfortunately, Zac had no idea what it meant, as he'd never heard anyone mention it back in Port Atwood.

He was both relieved and a bit disappointed after hearing Greatest's opinion. Relieved that it was something good that many would want. But at the same time, it wasn't something great to the point that he was interested in it. Initially, Zac had believed he had created some miracle of the ages, but perhaps the reality wasn't quite that exciting.

For the first time, Zac didn't look at the powerhouse in front of him like he was some sort of primordial beast, but rather a treasure trove of information. This man was no doubt far more knowledgeable about pretty much anything compared to anyone on his island.

The answers to so many questions he had lay with him, and perhaps even the solution to all the predicaments on Earth. There was no doubt that this man could singlehandedly destroy all the incursions and the Dominators without breaking

a sweat. He likely even had a bunch of underlings who could do so.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained, and Zac was about to ask the man for assistance, but before he had a chance, Greatest started talking again.

“Brat, let’s go. This was a valuable lesson for me as well. I’ve been too lenient with you due to your mother, seeing as you shrank away from the face of death. You need some real battle experience, so I’ll ask the Red Emperor to accept you into the Eternal Legion for a campaign or two. If you survive, I’ll allow you to change your name,” he said with a widening smile.

All color quickly drained from the face of Average, and horror even eclipsing that from earlier filled his eyes. But he clearly knew better than to fight with his battle-crazed father and instead chose to stare at Zac like he wanted to cry but had no tears left.

“Ha ha, little progenitor, if you ever find yourself in the Red sector of the Allbright Empire, come and have a drink with this old man. If I’m in a good mood, I might even let you try one of our Certain Death trials!” the man said, ignoring his son.

“Wait!” Zac shouted, but it was to no avail.

The next moment, the two simply disappeared, leaving Zac alone with a slew of questions. Only a few seconds later, he got a prompt telling him that his quest was complete, and a crystal spawned next to him. The quest didn’t hand out the rewards, though, and Zac guessed he would get them at his own Nexus Node back in Port Atwood.

Zac sighed as he looked up at the stars. Meeting Greatest had been eye-opening in more ways than one. He couldn’t wait for the day that Earth had braved the trials of the integration, and he didn’t have to fight tooth and nail for every advantage.

He also realized that it was a pipe dream to depend on others for help with his own problems. It was unreasonable to

expect some random powerhouse to help out a place like Earth, making an enemy of the Undead Empire and the Cult of the Everlasting Dao in the process.

But it wasn't all bad. He knew that the Allbright Empire was a vast force that had all kinds of opportunities. It wouldn't be a bad place to travel to in the future. Having already made a sort of connection with such a powerhouse over there might open all kinds of doors.

One could even see it as the hidden reward for the quest since meeting Greatest might be worth far more in the end compared to some Dao Treasure. But that was all for later. He needed to focus on the present, and there was a Treasure Hunt to reap some benefits from in two weeks.

Zac only took one last glance around the town before he touched the crystal and disappeared. As for the fate of the warring states of the Solvim, that had already left his mind.

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Unbeknownst to Zac, two people stood in the air, looking down at the town as Zac touched the crystal.

“So he really was a progenitor,” Average said with interest, seeing his new rival disappear. “No wonder I didn't recognize him. I still believe I would have been the one to win in a life-and-death battle, though.”

“The only way you'd beat him is relying on treasures I gave you. Then it would have been me who defeated him, not you. Remember, items are only a crutch. Only our fists are eternal,” Greatest said with a snort.

“Why did you give him that bracer? Didn't you craft it for Lord Greenwood's new personal disciple?” Average asked, knowing better than to argue with his unreasonable father.

“I'll just say the craft failed,” the man said with a grin. “It's more important to sow the seeds of karma.”

“Was he really worth it? That was hundreds of thousands of E-grade Nexus Coins you threw away,” Average muttered.

“You haven’t even given me something that good.”

“What use is that bracelet to you, brat?” Greatest snorted. “The way you’ve been running about, who doesn’t know exactly who you are? As for whether it’s worth it, I think we will find out sooner rather than later.”

“But if he was so important, why didn’t you do more to help him out? I’ve heard how messed up the situations on those new planets are. Isn’t he almost guaranteed to die?” Average skeptically asked.

“I can’t meddle with an integration like that. And even if I could, I wouldn’t, because then my gamble would have been truly worthless,” Greatest said with a shake of his head. “For now, that brat is only a promise of greatness. But if I stepped in at this juncture, he would likely never pass the second bottleneck. Besides, I believe he is well on his way to solving those issues himself. He is quite impressive, even by progenitor standards.”

Average only looked down again one last time before summoning a huge vessel. There was no network in this remote pocket of the Red Sector, and it would take over a week to get back home. He briefly wondered if he’d ever see that brutal guy again.

But he soon put it out of his mind, as he had his own things to worry about.





## SPECIALTY CORE

As soon as Zac touched the crystal, he once again found himself in front of the Nexus Hub south of Azh'Rodum. When he looked around, he also noticed two boxes neatly placed right in front of him.

He took up the first one and opened it, finding a densely inscribed plaque inside. He picked it up, and a stream of information immediately entered his mind. It was the entrance token to the Tower of Eternity, and there was quite a bit of information it provided.

He could use the token at any moment after reaching level 50, so technically, he could use it right now if he wanted. Of course, he wouldn't go just yet, as he wanted to push as far as possible, reaping the maximum amount of benefits. Therefore, he'd first do both the Treasure Hunt and the first step of the inheritance he ended up choosing before trying the Tower.

He also learned that the token was personal and could not be sold or traded. Finally, anyone had two shots at the tower, after which they would be eternally locked out of it. However, to take the trial the second time, another token had to be earned somehow.

Zac put the token away into his pouch and opened the second box. Inside was a small shimmering vial with a luminescent liquid splashing around inside. Zac sighed a bit in disappointment when he saw the content. The liquid was the Dao Treasure, and Zac knew the method of using it was quite simple.

He simply needed to drink it to obtain its effects. However, he didn't do so just yet, as a Dao Treasure wasn't quite as simple as an attribute fruit. The vial would place him in a state of enlightenment, somewhat like his state when he'd improved his Dao of Heaviness back at the auction, but it wouldn't guarantee a new Dao Seed or improve one.

As far as Dao Treasures went, it was one of the more mediocre ones. But then again, he already knew it'd only be an F-grade treasure. Besides, while it wouldn't give him a completely new seed like some treasures did, it would at least give him a shot at improving a current one.

The best way to utilize this type of Dao Treasure was to first decide on which seed to improve and take the first steps on the type of insight he wanted for it. That would maximize the chance to gain something from the vial. Of course, using the vial to improve his Dao of Sharpness would be far easier than his Dao of Trees, since one was still at the low stage, whereas the Dao of Trees was just missing one step to reach its peak.

Zac had some difficulty in choosing which way he should go on the matter. For one, he knew that improving the Dao of Trees would bring far more attributes than the others, but at the same time, its usefulness in battle was a bit limited.

Conversely, it felt like a bit of a waste to use his treasure on the Dao of Sharpness, as he really should be able to improve it by himself since it still was only on the first stage. He wasn't in a hurry, since there still were roughly two weeks before the Treasure Hunt started, but he felt he would have to use it before then to maximize his battle potential.

Having packed away both his treasures, he walked north toward the demon town. Azh'Rodum was still somewhat deserted, as many of the demons lived in Port Atwood nowadays. But some people were walking the streets, humans and demons alike.

The simple reason was the Nexus Crystal mine. Those who worked the mine lived in the town, only sometimes heading to Port Atwood. However, those who lived here had special

passes, and normal citizens of his town couldn't get here unless they managed to pass through the sea of barghest and gwyllgi to get here.

This was, of course, to protect the rich resources of the area. There were plans to sooner or later turn the whole mountain into a restricted zone with the help of arrays, but such an undertaking would cost over 100 million Nexus Coins and wasn't something he could prioritize at the moment.

Since he was here anyway, he couldn't resist heading over to his hidden cavern and was elated to find that the density of the Cosmic Energy in the air felt slightly sparser compared to before. Zac felt it was good news since that hopefully meant that the bead was absorbing large amounts of energy.

Still, he couldn't discern any changes to the bead down at the bottom of the calm pond as of yet. He wasn't surprised at that, though, since the lotus was a top-tier treasure for a recently integrated world, after all. Even with the help of the pond, it would likely take a long time for it to grow to the state he'd seen at the Abbot Everlasting Peace's monastery.

Since everything seemed to be going according to plan, Zac headed back to Port Atwood. He'd only been gone for a day, but he still went over to Calrin's. The attuned Nexus Crystals weren't anything rare, and it shouldn't take the gnome much time to acquire them.

Zac's current venues to become stronger were at the moment slightly limited. There was still the island with the Mystic Realm, but even if he battled for two weeks straight, he doubted he'd gain more than a level tops, seeing as he'd just gained level 61. That would barely provide any benefits, and there were better ways to spend his days before the Treasure Hunt.

He felt that he needed to improve himself in other manners. Levels weren't where he was lacking. That became quite clear from his fight with Average. The teenager had completely dominated him in the fight until Zac turned it around by taking a large risk.

Zac was simply lacking combat proficiency. He had learned some of it from battle, but battle with animals and **[Axe Mastery]** could only take him so far. He had encountered the same problem with Rydel back in the final fight of the demon incursion. A large number of attributes were worthless unless he could properly utilize them.

While he knew that he couldn't get as good training as Average had received, there should be something he could do. Zac didn't know exactly what level Average was, but he guessed that the youth should be level 75, at the stage of gaining as many titles and other advantages as possible before evolving.

Greatest had said that he'd trained his son for almost twenty years, making the youth older than he looked. It wasn't anything surprising, seeing as Average had likely reached E-grade race long before he turned sixteen years old, thanks to various treasures.

Since it only took Zac six months to reach level 61, he felt that someone close to being twenty years old from such a prestigious background should be max leveled by now, even if they went slowly and steadily. Gaining the levels was usually the easiest step in evolving, but it was other things that held people back.

From what he understood, some spent a decade at the bottleneck before advancing, though he still didn't know exactly why. Alyn and Ogras had always been a bit diffuse about what happened in E-grade, only saying that one would become a lot stronger. Until now, he hadn't really cared, but it was quickly becoming more and more relevant.

Resuming his training to improve his battle techniques wasn't the only option. Another way to get stronger was his Dao, and he was planning on spending some time on that. But in the end, Zac believed his core to be the most promising venue to improve. Greatest clearly understood what it was, and mentioned it was a good thing. He quickly wanted to infuse it with more energy to complete its construction.

He felt he shouldn't be too far off, as a large part of it was covered with fractals by now. Perhaps a final push was all that was needed before he could start to unravel its mysteries.

After a quick walk, he found himself at the Thayer Consortium, sitting down once again with Calrin. The little gnome quickly produced twenty-five luminous crystals, each emitting dense and refreshing energies.

“Twenty-five E-grade Divine Crystals,” Calrin said.

“Great,” Zac said as he placed them in his pouch. “By the way, have you ever heard of the concept of a ‘Specialty Core’?”

Zac tried asking the Sky Gnome since he might be the most knowledgeable person on the island apart from the Creators. However, while they came from an extremely powerful faction, they were almost fanatical about crafting, caring little about other things. Meanwhile, Calrin did hail from a former C-grade family, after all.

“Specialty Core?” the gnome questioned as his face scrunched up. “I’m not sure... Wait! I’ve read about it in some of our old scriptures before we were forced to sell them.”

“Oh, what do you know?” Zac enthusiastically asked.

“Well, not much, to be honest. From what I understand, they are quite rare, but they can enable things out of the norm, so to speak?” Calrin hesitantly said.

“Huh?” Zac blurted with scrunched-up brows, not feeling any clearer about what his core was.

“Hmm... Say, for example, there’s a lightning mage. He is specialized to inflict as much damage as possible, but each strike costs a lot of Cosmic Energy,” Calrin began explaining. “He realizes that a good addition to his skill is the ability to create large clouds that can generate the lightning bolts for him, saving him a lot of energy.”

“Sure.” Zac nodded along.

“But his class is specialized; his pathways don’t work with those kinds of skills. So he gets a Specialty Core that is

attuned to water and wind. Suddenly, he can create the clouds through his core, and his fighting style has gotten much more versatile.”

Zac felt he understood the concept, though he had some difficulty understanding exactly what it meant for his own core.

“So the Specialty Core adds more elements you can use?” Zac probed.

“Well, no. That was just an example. From what I understand, the names come from the fact that they are created with a specific purpose in mind. Adding an element is just one example,” Calrin explained. “But they are very rare. I’ve never met anyone with one as far as I know. Perhaps they are more common in the higher planes. I’m not sure.”

By higher planes, Calrin simply meant the sectors with higher-tier planets. While there wasn’t any strict hierarchy, it seemed, planets were generally lumped together with other planets around the same energy, due to being placed in a part of the Multiverse with a certain level of ambient Cosmic Energy.

Earth already was in a pretty good spot, seeing as it started as D-grade, though it was at the bottom of the grade. But it also meant that there likely weren’t any high-tier planets in the close vicinity, apart from perhaps a C-grade planet being the core of the sector.

Conversely, it was possible that Earth was one of the main planets in a sector with mainly E- and F-grade planets. Actually, that felt like an even more likely scenario, seeing as how energy starved Earth had been before the integration.

In the end, Zac thanked the gnome for his help and left for his compound. While he still didn’t exactly know what his core would do, he felt he had a clearer picture of the situation. And perhaps everything would become more apparent the moment his core was finished absorbing energy.

Zac couldn’t wait to try it out and only informed the guards to tell his sister he was back before he went into

seclusion to start absorbing the crystals. Soon he sat in his courtyard with the arrays erected, with a Divine Crystal in his hand.

The core greedily ate the energy the crystal contained, and it felt the fit was far better than any other life-attuned energy he had given it so far except the pure energies contained in the lotus seed. The amount of energy was excellent as well, and it felt like he sat in a spring of life, every cell in his body vibrating with vitality.

After roughly two hours, he started to sense some instability in the core due to the life-attuned energies overpowering the other side, and he quickly took out one of his E-grade Miasma Crystals. Absorbing a Miasma Crystal was, as expected, the opposite of the Divine Crystals, and it felt like he was gripped with a cold hand of death as he absorbed its energies.

This process kept repeating for a few times until he hesitantly decided to hold one crystal in each hand and started absorbing again. The energies wildly clashed in his body, causing quite a bit of pain, but in the end, it was manageable. The important thing was that his rate of absorption had doubled, and Zac didn't move for day after day.

His mind was completely emptied, and he only focused on the vast amounts of energies that passed through his body on their way to his Specialty Core. After a few days, he had absorbed over a hundred times the energy he had available in his body at any given moment, clearly displaying the extreme amounts of power the small core contained.

It was only on the sixth day he felt a change. His core finally seemed satiated.





## DUPLICITY

Zac was quite relieved when he put away the half-absorbed crystals. He had already expended most of his stock of Divine Crystals, and he was starting to fear that his core was simply a bottomless hole. But now he knew there truly was a limit to it.

Zac closed his eyes and focused his senses on the core, trying to understand what it did. It had undergone quite a change unbeknownst to him in the past week. Before he started to absorb the E-grade crystals, it had been a chaotic jumble of gold interchanged with black, likely representing life and death.

Now the chaos had given way to order, and there was a clean line of demarcation, with each of the halves of the core seemingly consisting of one of the colors. This only was the surface, though, as Zac's mental sight had no means to penetrate the surface of the Specialty Core.

Covering the core were dense patterns of inscriptions, but even after looking at them for half an hour, he didn't really find out anything of use. Calrin had said that Specialty Cores served a special function, but Zac simply had no way to discern what this one would do from his clues so far.

He knew that the fractals were created by the Apostate of Order to follow a certain ruleset, but as far as he was concerned, it was all unreadable hieroglyphs so far. He had rather hoped to receive some sort of information burst to explain the core when it was done, but there was no such luck.

The core also didn't respond in the slightest when he tried to infuse it with Cosmic Energy or his Dao, no matter how much he tried. It felt like he was staring at a treasure trove just out of reach. With a sigh, he opened his eyes, admitting defeat for now.

The good news at least was that he probably wouldn't be in any danger any longer when he traveled the Dead Zone. Since his core was satiated, it shouldn't absorb any more Miasma when killing zombies or other undead.

The bad news was that his gambit to get stronger before the Treasure Hunt through the core seemed to be a wash. However, there still was a week to go, and he could at least work on his Dao. Zac opened up his status screen to take another look at his seeds, but something odd made him stop in his tracks.

The bad news was that his gambit to get stronger before the Treasure Hunt through the core seemed to be a wash. However, there still was a week to go, and he could at least work on his Dao. Zac opened up his status screen to take another look at his seeds, but something odd made him stop in his tracks.

**Name: Zachary Atwood**

**Level: 61**

**Class: [F-Rare] Hatchetman**

**Race: [E] Human**

**Alignment: [Earth] Port Atwood - Lord**

**Titles: Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Core**

**Dao: Seed of Heaviness – Middle, Seed of Trees – High, Seed of Sharpness – Early**

**Core: [F] Duplicity**

**Strength: 344**

**Dexterity: 162**

**Endurance: 231**

**Vitality: 201**

**Intelligence: 90**

**Wisdom: 85**

**Luck: 93**

**Free Points: 3**

**Nexus Coins: 20,853,653**

There actually was a new row for his core, right beneath his Dao Seeds. The System had named his core Duplicity, which felt like a clue. Zac didn't think it meant that the core would help him become a better liar, but rather referred to the two halves of it.

Unfortunately, there was no menu for him to go further, such as his Dao Screen or title screen, and that simple line was his only clue. But Zac remembered he actually had a title about his core, and perhaps it might give him some answers.

**[Core: Successfully form a Core. Reward: 5% Strength, ?????????]**

To his surprise, the title had actually changed, now giving out a pretty good reward. When he first received the core, it had given him nothing, only displaying a line of question marks. The question marks were still there, though, making Zac a bit confused.

As he saw it, there were two possibilities. The first possibility was that the core simply wasn't complete yet, and it being satiated with energies was just the first step in building it. That would explain why it was completely inert, even though it was complete.

The other possibility was that the question marks showed that the title could keep improving. In the status screen, the

core was shown in the same way as his class and race, with a grade before it, showing it likely could be upgraded in the same manner.

Or perhaps it was something else entirely; he was simply speculating at the moment. But seeing the title made him remember something he had forgotten in all the excitement, something that might spell trouble down the line.

Until he met Greatest, he had been operating under the assumption he was essentially growing a normal Cultivator's Core ahead of schedule. He'd based this on the fact that it was positioned right where a normal core would appear when reaching D grade, and it being tightly integrated with his pathways.

But from how Calrin had explained it, a Specialty Core was like an add-on to a warrior rather than swapping out the core. What would happen to him in the future when the spot for his normal core was already occupied? Was it possible to move his new core?

Various thoughts and scenarios whirled in his head, but finally, he reluctantly tabled the matter. He simply knew too little about the situation, and there was nothing he could do at the moment. In any case, a 5% boost to his Strength wasn't shabby, making it well worth the week he'd spent nurturing the core.

Zac put his three free points into Endurance and closed his menu. He was initially going to make a decision on his Dao Seeds, but he felt he needed to clear his head first. For the first time in almost a week, he stood up and stretched his stiff body before leaving his courtyard.

It was around midday, and neither Kenzie nor Emily was at home. He was a bit bored, so he decided to head to the academy. He wanted to see his sister, and Alyn would perhaps have some helpful knowledge about Specialty Cores.

The academy had changed quite a bit during the past weeks, forming a compound of its own. Before, it had simply been a large field of gravel where the Valkyries trained, but now it felt like a real place of learning.

There were over ten structures that held either classrooms or training facilities, and the large training field had been turned into five fields, each with different settings for the gravity array. He was planning on taking a tour but stopped when he passed the field with the lowest gravity boost.

Emily was currently facing a demon warrior, holding a small tomahawk in each hand. The demon was unarmed and simply blocked her strikes by redirecting their trajectories.

“Your strikes still lack ferocity,” the demon said. “You and your attacks need to be indomitable. The axe is not like a sword, where there exist myriad techniques. The axe is a simpler tool, with fewer ways to attack. It is easier for me to block you because it’s easy for me to guess your attack patterns.”

“So what should I do? And don’t say change weapon,” Emily huffed.

“Make it so that it doesn’t matter if I know what you’re about to do. Crush all resistance; break all defenses. Does Lord Atwood hide his intentions in battle? No, he simply pushes forward, crushing tactics with power,” the demon said, clearly with some approval in his voice.

Zac scratched his chin with a wry smile as he walked away. While what the demon said at the end sounded like a compliment, it also made him sound a bit like a simpleton who only charged straight ahead. He really needed to add some brains to his brawns.

It seemed that Emily hadn’t listened to either Alyn or Alea, swapping to a more magically inclined class. But Zac wouldn’t stop her from following her convictions. If she felt that strongly about using axes, it probably was for the best if she kept it up.

Zac didn’t interrupt the training and let her be since he knew that Emily was working extremely hard in preparation for her sixteenth birthday. She had been hungering to get stronger since Fort Roger, and she was almost there now.

Instead, he headed over to Alyn's. The schoolmistress still chose to stay inside the academy, though her simple house had received an extensive upgrade. Recently, he had learned the reason so many demons helped Alyn out with various things. She had quite a few suitors.

It appeared that the combination of ruthlessness and grace and intellectual demeanor made the schoolmistress quite a catch in the eyes of many of the demonic warriors. It was even to the point that a few of the warriors had mainly stayed behind on Earth because she did so.

"Lord Atwood, what brings you here?" Alyn said with a smile as she opened her door and indicated for him to sit down in a chair on the patio.

"I simply wanted to take a look at the progression of the academy," Zac said as he sat down. "It looks like you have everything in hand."

"Everything is proceeding fine. It turns out that you stopping me from whipping the children did not lessen the children's productivity. I still have much to learn, it seems," Alyn said.

"We have also found a few islanders who were teachers before your world got integrated, and we are currently teaching them a revised curriculum along with the children. Within a year, we will have operations running for children between six and eighteen."

"That's great. And the armies?"

"Apart from the Valkyries, there currently are around twenty-five hundred humans in training. Around half of them are cultivators coming from Refugees' Harbor. However, they're still mostly a hodgepodge group of people of various strengths and weaknesses. They lack structure and discipline," Alyn said with a sigh. "Currently, they wouldn't be any use in assaulting an incursion."

"I'm sure you can whip them into order. No need to be as lax with soldiers as with the children," Zac said with a small smile. "What about the Beast Master I sent you?"

“You mean the pet caretaker?” Alyn said, raising an eyebrow. “Well, I think she should get some sort of class choices related to beasts. We are currently getting her acquainted with barghest and the Ayn hive in hopes to improve her choices before rushing her to level 25. She was a bit reluctant at first, but she came around after I explained about the bond between a Beast Master and its horde.”

“Great, keep me posted on that,” Zac said with a nod.

The two kept conversing about various topics for a bit, and Zac even broached the subject of Specialty Cores. Unfortunately, Alyn knew even less about them than Calrin, only having heard that stronger forces sometimes depended on Specialty Cores for their advanced Heritage to work.

“Where does Kenzie usually train?” he finally asked after having gone through everything he needed for the moment.

“She’s over at the fourth quadrant. She’s quite impressive, you know. She has a mage class, but I’ve never met someone with such amazing reflexes. She’d make a great swordfighter or pugilist as well,” Alyn said, her eyes brightening up. “Perhaps a hybrid class at E-grade, like I’m pushing for with Emily.”

Zac was a bit confused, but then it hit him. Kenzie had never displayed any particular feats of athleticism back in the day, though she played a bit of basketball in school. But now she had an AI helping out. Perhaps it could provide her with similar features as his [**Axe Mastery**], except that it also worked in battles.

He realized his sister might even be able to help him train his close combat. From what he understood, Jeeves refused to help others, but if the two sparred, the AI would help both of them out whether it liked it or not.

Zac walked over to the field and soon found Kenzie in a corner of the field. She was currently wielding a fireball in one hand and a floating icicle in the other as she ran through an obstacle course. There were targets planted at various places, and it seemed it was set up so that she was supposed to shoot



an attack of a specific element, depending on the markings on the targets.

Zac let her finish her run, after which she came up to him, a slight sheen of sweat covering her.

“Impressive,” Zac said with a smile.

“You’re finally out of your hole?” she said with a slightly accusatory tone. “I thought you would stay in there until the Treasure Hunt.”

“Honestly, I’m only out to take a breather. There’s still a lot to do. What are you doing?” Zac asked, changing the subject.

He knew he hadn’t spent a lot of time with his sister since he’d saved her, and he felt bad about it. But at the same time, there was simply so much to do. He was desperately struggling to keep his edge in order to keep himself and the citizens of Port Atwood safe.

“I’m training coordinations. Jar... My friend said that a big weakness for mages is adaptability and close combat. He designed this course so that I will get better at adapting my attacks, and to better handle myself while fighting. He says that standing still and shooting fireballs is the same as waiting to be killed,” she explained.

Zac had to agree with the AI after thinking back to his fights with mages. They were quite annoying, and their attacks were often very strong, but usually when Zac caught up to them, the fight was over. One swing or two, and they were dead. It felt extremely prudent to learn some footwork in conjunction with the spells. If she could keep shooting fireballs while running to maintain her distance from her target, she would be far safer.

“Sounds like a smart idea,” Zac said approvingly.

“More importantly, you should go see Hannah,” Kenzie said. “I tried to tell you three days ago, but you were unreachable.”

“Hannah?” Zac said with a frown. “What’s going on?”

“I think she’s in trouble,” Kenzie said, looking a bit concerned.



## TO FORGIVE

“She came to me a few days ago, wanting to speak with you. She looked pale and haggard,” Kenzie said with worry on her face. “I tried to ask what had happened, but she wouldn’t say. She only said she really needed to speak with you.”

Zac frowned, an unsettling feeling emerging in his chest. Was someone making things difficult for Hannah because she was his ex?

“I went by her house yesterday,” she continued. “It looked like someone had harassed her. The door was broken.”

“Did you talk to her again?” Zac said with some agitation.

“No, I couldn’t find her since then. But I told Ogras to have people patrol her neighborhood,” Kenzie said.

“I’ll fix the situation,” Zac said, leaving without another word.

Anger was burning in his chest as he moved toward Hannah’s house in the residential district. He had to assume that someone was harassing her due to her complicated relationship with him.

It wouldn’t be impossible that it was someone doing things to Hannah in a misguided attempt to suck up to him, or perhaps it was someone who simply delighted in kicking people when they were down. But whatever the case was, it had thoroughly enraged Zac.

Even if the feelings of affection had cooled over the past months, Hannah was still someone who held a place in his

heart. She was someone who knew Zac rather than Super Brother-Man. Whoever was behind this would regret inserting themselves into his affairs.

He soon arrived outside Hannah's house once again, and it was just like Kenzie had said. The white door from earlier was actually cracked open, now resting against the wall. A new door had been installed, though it clearly was a makeshift solution, as it didn't properly fit in the doorframe.

That wasn't all. Multiple windows were broken, and it looked like someone had thrown mud at the villa. Zac stood completely frozen for a few seconds, unbelieving at what he was seeing. Suddenly, he saw a slight movement in one of the windows, telling him that Hannah was home. This time, he didn't knock, instead immediately entering in haste.

Luckily, it was clear that no one dared to actually enter the home of Hannah, leaving the interior intact. A sound was heard, and Zac could see a haggard-looking Hannah step out of a doorway, holding a pillow in front of her.

"Are you okay? What's going on?" Zac said with concern.

Hannah didn't say a word and only started sobbing. Zac moved over to her by instinct and placed his arms around her. Suddenly, a slight prick of pain erupted in his stomach, and he moved away with some confusion.

To his shock, Zac saw that a dagger was firmly embedded in his gut. He couldn't understand how he could be attacked like this without any alarm bells going off, or more importantly, that Hannah would attack him. Zac furiously looked up at his ex, but before he had time to do anything, a boundless cold erupted from the weapon.

"You..." was all Zac could say as darkness took him.

---

A storm of emotions rushed through Hannah's head as she looked down at the unmoving corpse of her former boyfriend.

Adrenaline coursed through her veins, to the point that her hands couldn't stop shaking.

She'd truly done it; she had managed to kill the strongest man in the world. She knew that meant she had gained the lordship title and that she was in control of both the huge wealth of the town and the Dao Repository. The path to becoming a true elite of the world was open.

She thought she would be elated, but as she looked down on Zac, she only felt empty, disgusted even. She had seen true anger on Zac's face when he had stopped to see the damage she and David had orchestrated to make him run here in a hurry. An unsettling feeling was starting to rise in her chest, the scene of Zac arriving playing over and over in her mind.

"I wasn't sure you'd go through with it," David said as he stepped out from his hiding spot behind a false wall, panting and pale.

When she saw her co-conspirator, Hannah's chaotic thoughts quickly stilled, and she turned to him with a frown.

"I can't rely on others to become stronger. It doesn't matter if he slept with that bitch or not. I still have my goals, and he was in the way of them. And what's with you?" Hannah asked, calming her raging emotions.

"Do you think it's easy to mask the killing intent from his senses?" David huffed. "More importantly, is he dead?"

Hannah's eyes suddenly widened in a horrifying realization.

"I haven't received any energy! He's still alive!" Hannah frantically said as she looked down at the knife that blazed in golden luster.

The knife she got from David was called a [**Purifying Dagger**] for some reason, and it stole all the living energies out of a body to a certain extent. The knife would have no effect on a zombie, but to a human it essentially was a death sentence.

It was the very dagger she'd received from David when they started hatching this scheme. He had apparently gotten it

in the Tutorial for completing a difficult quest and had kept it secret until they hatched this plan. Its weakness was that it could only be used once, becoming scrap metal afterward. David had multiple times exhorted her to make the stab count for that very reason.

Unfortunately, it seemed that there was a limit on how much Vitality it could absorb. But even with the enormous power of someone like Zac, it should at least have absorbed a large chunk of his life force since Zac was truly looking like a pale corpse at the moment.

As she looked down on Zac, who blankly stared up at the ceiling, she knew he wasn't long for this world, even if they left him alone. It had probably passed a threshold where the lack of Vitality would cause a chain reaction where one organ after another shut down.

However, David frowned and immediately rushed toward Zac, not wanting to take any chances. But before he had time to decapitate his former friend, a shield of shadows appeared over the lifeless body of Zac.

In the next instant, a spear penetrated David's gut, lifting him up in the air. He screamed in pain, but he was unable to extricate himself. He helplessly hung in the air, blood freely raining down on the floor.

"Now look what you have done," a desolate voice said with a sigh as the demon leader stepped out of the shadows, holding a spear. "You may just have doomed your planet. For what? Revenge for him dumping you?"

"For power. I got a quest that gave me lordship if I managed to kill Zac. We did it, giving me complete control. I know you want **[The Umbra]** Inheritance. Help me solidify my position and it's yours. Anything else you need that Port Atwood has, you will be given," Hannah quickly said.

This wasn't what they had planned. The idea was to solidify their position and take control of the arrays covering the town before anyone even found out Zac was dead, and from there, negotiate from a place of power. That Ogras had

somehow found out about them was highly unnerving, and it felt as though things were getting out of control.

“What would it matter in the big picture if two pieces of trash like you got your hands on the inheritances? You would just squander the gifts anyway and then get killed by the invaders,” Ogras said with a sneer as he threw the wailing David into a wall.

“Besides, you seem to be under a misconception. You think you’re qualified to negotiate with me?” the demon continued, looking down at the unmoving body of Zac. “You’ve ruined so much for me, and you think I will let you live in peace? Your newfound lordship title won’t help you. The Ruthless Heavens respects power, and you don’t have it.”

The next moment, the demon stood in front of Hannah, and before she had time to react, he clutched her throat and lifted her up in the air.

“Don’t worry. I will not kill you. Since I can’t be the Lord, someone else will have to bear that burden. And you will just have to pray that we survive the coming years. Because you can trust me in this regard: if this planet falls and becomes my tomb, no one shall suffer more than the two of you until I meet my demise,” the demon growled.

“Let me handle it,” an abyssal voice suddenly said, making Ogras quickly turn around.

It was Zac, who was slowly getting to his feet, black ichor trickling from his mouth. At first, Ogras seemed relieved, but when he noticed the face of his friend, his pupils shrank to pinpoints, and he couldn’t help but take a step back.

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Rage and betrayal were coursing through Zac’s mind as he slowly got to his feet. He knew that he might have been dead for a bit, but somehow he’d heard everything that was said. He couldn’t believe that his two former friends would conspire to kill him.



He also had to admit that he was shocked that they actually succeeded. He hadn't thought many on Earth could harm him anymore, let alone kill him. But that horrible knife that Hannah used had sapped all the life in his body.

He still couldn't completely understand how he was still alive, as he'd clearly felt himself dying after he fell down on the floor. But soon after, the core in his body went haywire, spewing out a torrent of Miasma that still filled every corner of his body.

Perhaps the death-attuned energy had staved off true death, but Zac knew it would be a pain to get his body under control again. He remembered what an undertaking it had been to cleanse his wound earlier.

The Miasma also caused some odd reactions in his body, as his senses of sight and smell were all messed up. He could still see the others just fine, but it was as though there was another filter superimposed upon his normal sight.

It took him a brief moment to understand what it was. It was life. The Miasma somehow caused him to see pure life that made the others shine in an enticing light. Initially, he thought it was heat he saw, but after turning his head, he saw that wasn't the case. He could see the same effect on the trees through the window, and the flowers planted in the windowsill.

It was a magical sight, and Zac wondered if this was how the undead saw the world. The same actually went for his sense of smell, as he could actually smell the life coming from Hannah and Ogras. It was a sweet and refreshing scent, like a subdued perfume.

The effect also felt reminiscent of the energies from the skills that the purifiers used, though what he saw was more subdued and natural. He turned his head to the wounded David at the side and saw that small motes of life were leaving him from his wound. He was slowly bleeding out, his life leaving with him.

But more importantly, that wasn't the only different thing about him.

He didn't understand why everything was so different at the moment, but he attributed it to the deathly part of his core. Still, all these questions would have to wait for later, as he needed to deal with the situation.

"Just because of a misunderstanding, you tried to kill me?" Zac said with a sigh as he walked toward his former lover, whose horror was evident in her eyes. "Or was it greed?"

He blankly looked at Hannah for a few more seconds, the silence only broken by the wheezing of David. Zac once again turned his eyes to the man who was still huddled in the corner.

"I wondered why you didn't seek me out. I have been back for some time, after all. If you wanted to get stronger, you could have just asked, and I would have helped you. But it turned out David was already dead," Zac said with a sad sigh.

"What are you talking about?" David spat out between gritted teeth. "You shouldn't be alive."

Hannah looked quite confused as well, not understanding the exchange. Ogras' brows rose, however, as he looked over at the wounded man in concern. Zac only evenly stared at the person in front of him. When David saw the faces of Zac and Ogras, his frantic face suddenly turned completely calm.

"You didn't die, but you have fallen. Purity will come for you," David said, closing his eyes.

The next moment, Cosmic Energy gathered around David, his body starting to glow with a golden sheen.

But it didn't get further than that as tens of shadow blades chopped his body into mincemeat in the blink of an eye, effectively stopping the self-destruction.

Zac coldly looked at the lifeless body, seeing the motes of light quickly disappearing somewhere. To his surprise, a few of the motes entered his body, and he sensed the life energy entering the golden part of his core.

"Goddamn cultists," Ogras only spat. "This was a tricky one. I didn't actually kill him, I think. I received no Cosmic Energy."

“The weapon should have come from him,” Zac said with a frown, looking down at the shining knife. “We’ll find him.”

The reason he was so confident was his newfound sight. As long as he didn’t lose it, he wouldn’t need any Springroot any longer. It had been clear as day to him that David was a shape-shifter, as a ball of golden fire had emanated vitality from within his heart.

“He must have been one of the true elites that came through the incursion. Are you okay?” the demon hesitantly asked, bringing Zac out of his musings.

“I will survive,” Zac said with a shrug, turning to Hannah.

“Please, I – David tricked me,” Hannah frantically said.

“I forgive you,” Zac said after a while, causing Hannah’s eyes to widen in surprise and hope. “You were manipulated by a foreign invader.”

“Yes! It was David, no, that thing, who kept telling me to kill you!” Hannah agreed, her head bobbing up and down.

“But to forgive is not to condone the actions of others,” Zac muttered, mostly to himself, as he turned to Ogras. “Throw her in a dungeon for now until I decide what to do with her. If we don’t have one, build it.”

“Sure. Are you truly okay?” Ogras asked, knocking Hannah out cold.

Zac looked down on his former lover, whose face was in the middle of a transformation from hope to despair when she lost consciousness.

“I am fine. Why do you keep asking me that?” Zac asked with a frown as he looked back up at the demon.

“Well, for one, I know it kind of messes with your head to be betrayed by those close to you. I should know; my maid tried to murder me when I was eight,” the demon said with a shrug.

“But I mostly ask because you’ve turned into a netherblasted zombie.”



## DRAUGR

“What?” Zac asked with a sinking feeling, hurriedly walking over to a mirror in the house.

He was shocked at what stared back at him, and he finally understood the odd stares from the three earlier. Ogras wasn't kidding around with his comment; it truly seemed that he was looking at an undead rather than himself. Of course, it was still his features, but he now looked deathly pale like he'd lost all his blood.

But the largest difference was his eyes. They weren't the murky empty eyes of the normal zombies, and neither were they the balls shining with a red sinister life like those of Mhal, the Corpse-lord. Rather, they were like two black holes. The whites were completely gone, and only true blackness covered them. When he looked at them, it felt as though he was looking down into the abyss.

It was such an unreal feeling seeing himself like this that he had to touch his face to make sure he wasn't dreaming.

“What's going on?” he said, his voice now a bit shaky.

It started to look like the purpose of his core was to give him a second chance at life, though as an undead. The dagger should have killed him, but instead, he stood there, completely fine.

“That's what I'd like to know. Are you living? Are you dead?” Ogras said from the side, still keeping some distance from Zac. “It's weird, even if you died and somehow turned into a sentient elite zombie, you shouldn't have retained any

memories. Undead are completely different people just inhabiting a former person's body.”

Zac quickly opened his status screen to see if he could glean any information.

**Name: Zachary Atwood**

**Level: 1**

**Class: —**

**Race: [E] Draugr**

**Alignment: [Earth] Port Atwood - Lord**

**Titles: Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Core**

**Dao: Seed of Heaviness – Middle, Seed of Trees – High, Seed of Sharpness – Early**

**Core: [F] Duplicity**

**Strength: 344**

**Dexterity: 162**

**Endurance: 220**

**Vitality: 188**

**Intelligence: 90**

**Wisdom: 85**

**Luck: 93**

**Free Points: 0**

**Nexus Coins: 20,853,653**

The sight made him completely befuddled. There were a few shocking changes to his screen. First, the fact that both his level and class were completely reset, returning him to level 1.

The next thing was that his race no longer was human, but something called a Draugr.

What was confusing was that while he might have lost his levels and his class, all the benefits remained. His attributes were almost unchanged as far as he could remember, and his titles and Dao Seeds were still there. The only difference was that the boost to Endurance and Vitality that he'd gained from **[Forester's Constitution]** seemed to be gone.

He started to get an idea of what was going on, his eyes darting toward the line with his core. But to make sure, he opened the Ladders. As he suspected, he was still in a comfortable lead on the Wealth and Level Ladders.

Zac assumed that he was somehow split into two entities due to his odd core, each one possessing its own status screen. If he truly had been reborn as an undead, he shouldn't have all these attributes or still stay on top of the Ladder.

He even knew of a few Rankers who had fallen in the Dead Zone, turning into zombies. They immediately were removed from the Ladder, just like when anyone else died. That could only mean that the System still considered him to be alive.

Of course, this was only a theory tinged with desperation from his side, and he still didn't know how to use the core. Even after it had been satiated, he wasn't able to interact with it, and it was the same result now, even after it had somehow awoken. It would take some time to figure everything out before he could decide his next move.

"I am fine. I think it's just the Miasma in my body that went out of control. It might take some time to get it back in line," Zac said, hiding what was really going on for now.

"Miasma?" Ogras said with a frown. "I thought you said you got better."

"Well, it's complicated," Zac evaded. "It's like what you said with the unholy beacons. Destroying them is a waste when they can be useful."

The demon leveled an even gaze at Zac for a while, finally shaking his head.

“I don’t know what you’ve done, but you are playing with fire. The Multiverse is full of people who have turned into abominations in their pursuit of power. You need to wield the power, not let it wield you.”

Zac nodded with a grimace in response. He knew that growing an unknown core that was partly composed of Miasma was a crazy gambit, but at the moment, he didn’t have a lot of alternatives.

“Don’t worry; I know what I’m doing,” Zac eventually said. “Or, well, I don’t really. But I’ll be careful. More importantly, how did you show up so quickly?”

“Fine. But remember, if you die to some stupid experiment, we’re all fucked,” Ogras said. “As for why I’m here, your sister told me something odd was going on, so I checked it out. I found no evidence that this girl was attacked, making me think she did this to her own house. I wanted to find out what she was planning, so I stayed in the vicinity. I didn’t expect them to almost kill you.”

“I still don’t understand how it’s possible,” Zac said as he looked down at the shining dagger. “Just what is that thing?”

“Not sure, but I would guess it’s an offensive array rather than an actual weapon. Otherwise, it shouldn’t have been strong enough to almost kill you,” Ogras said.

Zac was inclined to agree. Not only did the thing slice through his robe, but it effortlessly pierced his body. Hannah simply shouldn’t be strong enough to accomplish that. But if this dagger was something like the Thunder Punishment balls still in his pouch, he understood why it was so dangerous. The onetime offensive arrays held extreme power.

He only didn’t expect it to look just like a weapon. Clearly, the Church of Everlasting Dao held various means beyond the understanding of both Ogras and himself.

“I’ll look into the weapon. Please try to find out just how a shape-shifter could replace David, and if the real one is still



alive somewhere. Perhaps he kept him for questioning. He did manage to trick Hannah for potentially weeks, after all,” Zac said.

“Have they reached the archipelago, or was it just a cultist lying in hiding from the incursion? It even managed to block my danger sense and fake its death right in front of us,” Zac added with a frown. “How is that even possible?”

“Nothing is unbeatable in the Multiverse. Any powerhouse has a good deal of Luck accumulated through the years,” Ogras explained. “But there are many means to trick it, at least temporarily. That’s a major part of the pure assassination classes. You can’t let your Luck be a crutch for you. Always be vigilant.”

Zac’s eyes thinned slightly when he heard the demon’s explanation. What Ogras said made sense, but he wondered why such an important piece of information had never left his mouth over these past months. Was the lordling still planning things in the shadows?

“As for the fake death, I have no idea. I think this guy must have been a second in command or a leader of the shape-shifters; he’s very slippery. It seems we will need to buy a lot more Springroot. Be careful of anyone approaching you now. He might have more of those daggers,” Ogras continued with a frown as the shadows swallowed him and the unconscious Hannah.

Zac looked around the room with some desolation before he took out a hooded robe from his cosmos sack to hide his new appearance. He also picked up the weird knife that Hannah had used on him, as perhaps it was a clue to all this.

Finally, he headed back home. He snuck over the wall when no one was looking, as he wasn’t ready to show his appearance to the guards. His mansion was empty at the moment, with both Emily and Kenzie luckily still at the academy. He quickly erected his set of arrays around it so that he wouldn’t be interrupted.

Zac sat down and started to ponder his next move. The first goal for him was to turn back to a human, as he didn’t

want to stay a so-called Draugr forever. However, he'd never received a shape-change skill or something similar from the core. And this was provided that he was correct about the function of his Specialty Core.

He turned his sight inward, looking at the core inside his body, trying to glean any hints. And to his surprise, he saw one. Before he'd turned to an undead, his core had been completely balanced, but now that balance was off.

The side with the Miasma had shrunk by at least 10 percent. The intricate fractals still covered the core, though, creating a fine mesh on it. Perhaps it meant that the core had expended some of its deathly energy to transform him.

Zac felt that the clues to this mystery hid in the fractals on the core. He still had no idea where they came from or how they were formed, but there was nothing else that could explain the weird things that were happening to him.

He slowly went over them one by one with far more scrutiny compared to before, trying to glean any meaning from them. The minutes turned to hours as he scoured the small orb over and over again until he started to see a pattern. For the first time since the fall, he felt he had some use of his job as an animator for a marketing agency.

Just like he needed to look over his designs frame by frame, he looked over the inscriptions fractal by fractal, trying to understand how they fit together and what they meant. And he actually made some progress after arduously creating a mental map of what was going on.

While at first glance the two sides seemed to possess quite similar fractals, there was a startling difference between the inscriptions of the life-attuned and death-attuned sides. There were more of them on the life-attuned side.

And after slowly mapping out just what the difference was, he realized that he recognized what remained. The inscriptions on the two halves of the cores formed a mostly closed network of pathways that were only connected at two places. After understanding the base framework, he could see what had been added on the life-attuned side.

It was his own pathways he got from the class Hatchetman. They were somehow added into the larger mesh on the life-attuned side, whereas the equivalent addition was missing on the death-attuned side.

While the phenomenon was weird, it wasn't too surprising that it looked like that. He was currently level 1 without a class, and he had already realized that his pathways were already gone. That was a big reason he had first thought he'd truly turned, as the familiar routes for his power were missing.

But Zac felt positive after having discovered the fractals for the Hatchetman class. Together with the other facts, it truly felt like the core only stored his class in the half containing the life-attuned energy. Now the next question was how to load it up again, so to speak.

But that wasn't really what was on Zac's mind at the moment. It brought to question something even more exciting. Was he able to gain two classes from now on? Just what would happen when he leveled up with this undead form?

The question burned in his mind, but he restrained himself from doing anything drastic. At first, he just wanted to rush out into the woods and start killing barghest by the truckload, rushing toward level 25.

But he also realized that this might be an opportunity. He knew far more about the System now compared to when he first was weak and alone on the island. Perhaps he could accomplish some amazing feats and gain titles with his status as a level 1 warrior.

The first title that came to mind was his title chain that began with **[Giantsbane]** and ended with **[Slayer of Leviathans]**. He didn't know where the limits to that title chain lay, but he felt there might be a final, ultimate title for killing a beast 75 levels higher than himself.

That was because it would mean that he'd surmounted an entire grade in a fight. He suddenly felt infinitely lucky that he wasn't the one who killed the shape-shifter that had taken David's form. Zac believed that getting the **[Slayer of Leviathans]** quest shouldn't be an impossible endeavor for

many people, as a level 50 without any titles wasn't very strong.

But killing an E-grade being at level 1 should be extremely uncommon, even in the context of the whole Multiverse, and should bring big benefits. It made him once again lament that he had no one like Greatest to consult about other opportunities like that.

All kinds of plans and opportunities flashed through his mind, and his worry was slowly being replaced with excitement.



## THE CORRECT PATH

Suddenly, Zac's train of thought was interrupted by a familiar figure pacing outside his array, looking fidgety. He blankly looked at her figure for a few seconds before removing the array with a frown.

"What do you want?" Zac asked as Alea started at the shield disappearing.

"I... heard from Ogras what happened. I just wanted to see if you were okay," Alea said with some hesitation in her voice.

"I am fine," Zac calmly said.

"That's great. I was worried," Alea started saying, but was interrupted by Zac.

"Until now, I've looked the other way regarding your eccentricities, such as poisoning me and others, chalking it up to mostly harmless pranks. But we're facing the reality of it now. All actions have consequences. I know you didn't mean it, and there were other factors at play. But you have a part in what happened today. Your actions in the square helped push Hannah along her path of no return," Zac said with an even voice.

"I..." Alea only managed to get out, looking physically hurt by his words.

However, Zac didn't stop. "I have decided to remove your title as head of security for Port Atwood. Hannah will spend an undetermined time locked away for her crimes, and I don't trust you with her. You're also no longer to come and go as

you please in my restricted area. I need some space,” Zac finished and closed his eyes.

Alea looked at Zac with red-rimmed eyes for a few seconds before she turned and walked away, the courtyard once again turning deathly silent.

Zac silently looked at the departing back of the poison mistress. He didn't regret what he said, as he'd felt it since she played him at the market square. He was, however, a bit surprised that he felt no internal turmoil or confusion.

It was as though his undead form had put a damper on all his feelings. They were still there somewhat, but there was a sense of disconnect with them. He briefly wondered if this was the case with all undead who had evolved to regain their sapience.

Perhaps it was necessary, as the zombies seemed to possess an inherent bloodlust. It would be impossible to build a society if the higher undead couldn't control their urges, so the unfeeling state might be a result of evolution.

He didn't get much further before approaching steps once again echoed in his compound. It seemed Ogras had rushed around to spread the news or something. This time, it was his sister who rushed into the courtyard with worry in her eyes.

“Are you okay?” Kenzie said as soon as she saw him.

However, Kenzie stopped a few meters away from him, looking at his new appearance with a frightened gaze.

“I'm fine,” Zac said with a sigh as he once again erected the arrays around the two.

He then proceeded to explain the situation, covering both his core and the events that had unfolded back at Hannah's. Kenzie silently listened to the narration, except exclaiming in shock upon the fact that Hannah had been the one to stab him.

The two of them silently sat in front of each other, not saying anything for a while, until Kenzie spoke up.

“What will you do with Hannah?” she asked.

“I don’t know. For now, she’ll be incarcerated,” Zac said, looking troubled.

He knew that in most empires out in the Multiverse, the punishment for trying to assassinate a leader would be execution without a doubt. But he wasn’t willing to go there with his ex-girlfriend, even if she’d tried to kill him.

“You know,” Kenzie said after mulling it over. “You said that David had been replaced with one of those shape-shifters. The thing could have used some mental skills on her. You know, she was hypnotized along with the others back in that town. I think I’ve heard that if you’ve been hypnotized once, you get more susceptible to it afterward?”

Zac gave a start and looked over at Kenzie with surprise. That truly wasn’t something he’d considered so far. He had been busy with his own transformation, so he’d simply chalked it up to betrayal because of greed mixed with anger.

“I heard about the matter in Refugees’ Harbor. But I don’t think hypnosis can make you kill someone, as that would be against their base instincts,” Zac finally said with a shake of his head.

“But it could make someone more paranoid, slowly make them crazy,” Kenzie retorted.

Zac silently thought it over. It truly was a distinct possibility that the shape-shifter did more than just provide the dagger. Still, did it even matter? The milk was already spilled, so to speak. And he didn’t believe that someone could be enticed to murder without there being a seed of hatred and malice to begin with.

“So when will you turn back?” Kenzie suddenly asked, changing the subject.

“Well, that’s the problem. I don’t really know,” Zac said as he scratched his chin.

“Why did you turn in the first place?” Kenzie asked.

“Well, perhaps the core went haywire because I briefly died?” Zac hesitantly said.



He honestly didn't know why the change had happened at that moment, but his best guess was that it was some sort of fail-safe built into the core.

"Didn't you say that the knife you got stabbed with sucked out all your life force?" Kenzie said. "Perhaps you turned into a zombie because that's the trigger rather than a defense mechanism."

"It's possible," Zac said with a nod. "I also thought I might revert to a human if I remove all the Miasma in my body."

"So why don't you?" she prodded.

"Well, for one, it might actually kill me, I have no idea," Zac said. "But I also believe that shouldn't be the only way to trigger the change. I can't die every time I want to shape-shift, and I don't have any more of these cultist knives."

"So you're going to stay a zombie until you find another way to change?"

"I'm a Draugr, not a zombie," Zac said, causing Kenzie to roll her eyes at him. "And I'll try to revert before the Treasure Hunt at the latest. I can't run around in there as an undead."

"Besides, don't I look pretty cool now? Like a vampire or something," Zac said and struck a pose.

"No way; you look really scary with those eyes of yours," Kenzie said, finally smiling a bit at the situation. "So what are you going to do?"

"I want to try out a few things. Gain a few titles and see if I can get a new class," Zac said. "Who knows, I might even be a cultivator now?"

"Dual-class; that sounds pretty cool!" Kenzie said, her eyes almost sparkling. "You should get a cool mage class, become the strongest hybrid."

"Well, first of all, I don't know how it'll work," Zac said. "If it will work at all."

However, Kenzie had brought up an interesting point. What would be the best class to match with his Hatchetman class? A mage class would help shore up his currently lacking

Intelligence and Wisdom, making him a truly balanced warrior.

However, a Dexterity-based class wasn't a bad idea either. Currently, he was forced to put a lot of points into Dexterity just to keep up with his growth in Strength. It had come to the point that he had decided to change to a 2.5:1 split from the original 2:1 so that he could focus more on Endurance and Vitality.

He'd arrived at this reasoning from his fight with Average. His main attribute was Strength, and he needed to play to his advantages. It didn't matter if he was hit ten times, as long as he got one big hit in, the fight would be over. He only needed to be able to endure the ten strikes, so to speak. That was why he wanted to work more on Endurance.

That also meant that an Endurance-based class, if there was such a thing, would be a good choice as well. Then he would be truly unkillable. Honestly, he felt either choice was good and had a hard time deciding what to do.

But it was still all speculation. He needed to reach level 25 first and see if it worked out as he intended. And he needed to see what options he got before deciding any further. There was also the issue of the Fruit of Ascension.

One of its effects was improving the choices in taking a class. But would that effect be expended if he got a class for his undead half? It felt more prudent to use its effects in trying for an Epic class at E-grade than getting a first class.

Or could he eat another fruit since he technically was a different person? There simply were so many things he didn't understand. He needed information.

"What are you thinking about?" Kenzie asked, dragging him out of his reverie.

"I just feel that there's so much I don't understand," Zac said with a sigh. "It's hard to plan things out when everything is just guesswork."

"Why don't you ask Brazla?" Kenzie said. "He's super old, and his creator was a top-tier D-grade craftsman, according to

him. He might know.”

Zac’s face scrunched up upon hearing the name of the crazy Tool Spirit, but he had to admit that Kenzie might be onto something. However, the only problem was whether he’d help. There were two other ways, as he saw it. One was to buy an information package through Calrin, and the other was asking the Creators.

Unfortunately, he was unsure whether he could afford the information from the Pavilion of Myriad Eyes. Just some basic information had cost him 15 million Nexus Coins. Advanced topics such as dual classes and Specialty Cores were probably prohibitively expensive.

Meeting Average and his dad had made him realize how utterly poor he was in the big scale of things since the teenager was able to throw out a billion Nexus Coins just to shoo someone away. As for the Creators, there was a risk for things leaking to higher echelons in the Multiverse.

“I guess I could try,” Zac sighed.

“I’ll come with. I haven’t talked to him today,” Kenzie said with a smile.

Soon the two stood in front of the gaudy towers, drowned in cascading rays of divine lights. Its surroundings were still not very exciting, but at least the uneven forest floor had been swapped out with a proper and uniform square.

Of course, it was likely too bland for the extravagant taste of Brazla. Unfortunately, there simply wasn’t much he could do about it at the moment. His funds were mostly tied up in creating the contribution system.

“Little chick, you have once again come to bask in the glory that is the Great Sage Brazla? This time, you even brought a Draugr to showcase?” the familiar voice echoed when they entered the hallway lined with the huge statues.

Not long after, Brazla appeared. It was only the second time they’d met, but Zac was surprised to see that Brazla was looking completely different. This time, he was bedecked like

some royal conqueror, though all the equipment was made from gold and platinum rather than serviceable materials.

His armor was completely studded with various gemstones, each somehow emitting almost blinding glimmers of light. Zac felt helpless the moment he saw the spirit, but he held his tongue.

“Hi, Brazla,” Kenzie said with a smile. “You look like a real warrior today.”

“The world should sigh in relief that the Great Brazla is confined to the interior of this building,” the Tool Spirit said with a serious nod. “This one might shake both the heavens and the earth.”

“You remember Zac?” Kenzie added.

“You went and turned into an undead, little Lord?” Brazla said, somewhat surprised. “Odd choice, if you ask me. I would have thought a mortal would have preferred to die from old age rather than getting taken by the madness.”

“The madness?” Zac asked, confused.

“The undead aren’t immortal, though they don’t grow old. They instead go insane, their bloodlust overtaking everything else. Finally, they turn too stupid to even move, withering in place into goops of Miasma. Quite disgusting,” Brazla said, looking unconcerned.

“Not everyone can be an immortal like you, Brazla,” Kenzie said with a smile. “We were wondering if you know anything about Specialty Cores and dual classes?”

“What doesn’t the Great Sage Brazla know?” the Tool Spirit said, puffing up his chest.

However, the next moment, he looked suspiciously at the two of them.

“But why should I tell you? You promised to fix my surroundings, but they still look like a pauper’s square.”

“I’m heading into a Treasure Hunt into unknown lands in a week,” Zac said. “I’ll find something unique in there to improve your surroundings if you help me out this one time.”

“Hmm... Well, all right,” Brazla said. “What knowledge do you seek, mortal?”

“Dual classes,” Zac said, ignoring the attitude.

“What about it?” Brazla said, a bit disinterested. “It’s possible. Is that what you’re trying for by turning into an undead?”

Zac only nodded, not explaining any further. It appeared that Greatest’s tool was working as intended since the spirit didn’t seem to notice anything off about him, instead thinking he simply was an undead.

“Well, it’s extremely rare,” Brazla continued. “Far rarer than body-and-spirit dual cultivators were back in the pre-System era. However, there is one race where all of them have dual classes. Of course, the Ur Wanderers are extremely few in numbers, born darlings of the Multiverse. Even the Great Brazla can’t help but be a bit jealous of them.”

Zac only nodded, not wanting to interrupt the Tool Spirit while it was actually being helpful. He simply assumed that the Ur Wanderers were a powerful species in the Multiverse. While species weren’t equal in the Multiverse, one could say that they were balanced in a sense.

Humans were quite weak, usually at the bottom rung. But they were extremely numerous, and out of every billion of them, a powerhouse might rise. Other races had huge advantages, sometimes even becoming C-grade upon adulthood by default. But these kinds of races were always far scarcer in numbers.

“So what do they do? Get two similar classes or opposites?” Kenzie prodded.

“There are no rules to cultivation, little chick,” Brazla said with some disdain. “Everyone has their own path. Finding the correct answer for oneself is half the struggle of becoming strong.”



## TITLES

Zac nodded at what Brazla said, his own thoughts running along the same lines. He had started to believe that one wouldn't become truly strong by brainlessly copying others. That was why he'd never had any interest in checking out the Heritages he owned.

That wasn't to say that one couldn't benefit from the knowledge of the previous generations. However, one first had to understand oneself and keep useful information, discarding the useless.

“Have you also heard of Specialty Cores?” Zac interjected, satisfied in simply knowing dual classes was a possibility, though clearly extremely rare.

“Of course,” Brazla said. “A few of the inheritances of this very building even contain the means to create one. Those I've studied extensively.”

Zac felt a bit troubled that the Tool Spirit somehow had managed to weasel itself into the inheritance zones to mess around. He could only hope that Brazla hadn't destroyed anything inside.

“What would happen if a Specialty Core is currently taking the spot of where the Cosmic Core would normally go?” Zac asked.

“Well, they'd probably explode when the Cosmic Core was created,” Brazla said. “Unless it's a modifier type, I suppose.”

“What's that?” Zac asked with anticipation.

Brazla only snorted in response, and from somewhere got a golden nail file and started using it. Zac had to push down his rising exasperation. He knew that the Tool Spirit only acted like this to annoy him since it was just a hologram and didn't even possess real nails. But that fact only made it more annoying, which was a source of frustration in and of itself.

"Great Sage Brazla, surely someone with your magnanimity wouldn't hold back this small amount of knowledge from your admirers?" Kenzie said with a wink.

"Hmm, true. This little information means nothing to the Great Sage of Ages." Brazla nodded, putting away his file. "Modifier cores are Specialty Cores that directly interact with a Cosmic Core in various ways. The most common example is the Specialty Core called 'Shield,' which simply acts as a shield around a Cosmic Core to protect it from attacks.

"But they can be much more integrated than that," the Tool Spirit continued. "I've heard about a customer of my master that had the Cosmic Core grow inside it. The purpose of the Specialty Core was to extract energy faster than normally possible. It resulted in extraordinary firepower, but also hurt the cultivator's body."

Zac's eyes lit up from the information. He didn't believe that sort of core had anything to do with his own, but it told him that it wasn't necessarily a problem with the position of his Specialty Core. If his real core simply grew inside his Duplicity Core, everything would work out okay. Perhaps it was even needed if he wanted to be able to switch between living and dead sides.

With the help of Kenzie buttering up the megalomaniac Tool Spirit, they soon had the answers they needed. Unfortunately, he didn't know of any other open titles that could be attained by abusing the discrepancy between his level and strength.

According to Brazla, there were a few titles that could be awarded to youths who showed great potential at an early stage, even before they were able to cultivate. They could, for



example, attain Dao Seeds or upgrade their race, even killing cultivators.

These were the so-called Heaven's Chosen, who were able to blast out with awe-inspiring power right out of the gates, and accumulated more and more advantages through their great start, just like himself. But since he was already level 1 he couldn't get these titles since he was supposed to get them before turning sixteen.

The rest of the titles were generally trials and hidden Mystic Realms with known rewards. But those kinds of things were all locked out of reach for Zac since the Nexus Hub would stay nonoperational until he managed to unlock its functions with some quest.

After a particularly hair-raising tirade where Kenzie spoke at great lengths about the greatness of Brazla, he was even so happy that he fished out a crystal containing a basic rundown of publicly known titles.

Zac threw a glance over at his sister, who only smiled mysteriously. Zac started to understand why she visited the Tool Spirit every day. Just what kind of valuables had she managed to squeeze out of Brazla simply by throwing away any shame and buttering him up?

The crystal confirmed what the spirit had said. There weren't a lot of public titles, and Zac had pretty much all of them. He also had a few that weren't listed, such as Luck of the Draw. It did, however, show that the next attribute-linked title would come at five thousand points total, but only if those were gained while still in F-grade.

That alone was a wake-up call for Zac who had accumulated just over 1,000 attribute points until now. He still had a lot of space to grow before evolving, but quintupling his attribute pool was an extremely daunting task. He had his unique encounters and advantages, but so did many other elites across the Multiverse.

The missive did at least confirm that there was a title higher than Slayer of Leviathans, which was great news to Zac. But otherwise, it was mostly mentions of various public

trials or Mystic Realms, and a short comment about recommended strength before attempting them.

It seemed that his dream of cheesing a large number of extra titles wasn't meant to happen. Still, there were a few of them. Not counting the core skill, it was perhaps possible to gain another set of his class-related titles, doubling up on the rewards. And perhaps there were additional titles for having two classes.

Judging by the title guide, there wasn't much of a reason to stay at level 1, so the next goal would be killing the E-grade beast. However, he honestly wasn't too certain about his chances. Since his pathways were gone, so were his skills, leaving him only his Dao Seeds and his brawn.

The only thing that remained seemed to be the effects of **[Forester's Constitution]**, and Zac guessed it was because the skill worked like a title, giving a passive attribute boost.

It truly depended on what kind of monster lurked in the crater containing the entrance to the Mystic Realm. If it was something with roughly the power of the Fiend Wolf, he wasn't too worried. He was far stronger than he had been back then, and he was confident he'd make short work of that animal as he was right now.

But it was another matter if he encountered something like the Star Ox. That thing had been exceedingly dangerous, and if he didn't possess **[Loamwalker]**, he would have perished from its devastating beam. Perhaps he would actually need to enlist a certain demon for this excursion, just in case.

"If you see Ogras, can you tell him I need to see him?" Zac said as he exited the towers with his sister.

"Why don't you call him?" Kenzie asked, looking a bit confused.

"What?" Zac asked confused. "Are phones operational again?"

Kenzie only rolled her eyes at him as she took out a crystal.

“It’s Kenzie. My brother needs to see you,” she said and put away the inscribed gem. “You two really are boneheads. You two haven’t even exchanged means to communicate?”

Zac awkwardly shrugged and started heading back toward their home. It was a relief to leave the Towers of Myriad Dao behind, as he was afraid he would get blinded if he stayed much longer. Ten minutes later, the demon appeared in Zac’s courtyard, immediately sitting down with a grunt.

“Your girl has been put in custody. I have Janos taking care of the situation until we can get a desolation array in place to sap her strength. Janos said that she’s been subject to some mental manipulation skills, something far more skilled than what the bumbling hypnotist did at Refugees’ Harbor. Not even he can unravel it in a short while,” Ogras said.

Pain and shame filled Zac’s heart, as he’d had no idea such things had happened right beneath his nose. But he forcefully pushed those thoughts away, focusing on what he could do at the moment.

“What about the shape-shifter?” Zac asked.

“Gone in the wind. The island is just too big; he could be hiding anywhere. The barghest in the woods won’t be a hindrance to him. I guess he never stayed inside the town for long periods in order to not be exposed. I asked around. ‘David’ was rarely seen after arriving in Port Atwood,” Ogras said as he took out a bottle of wine and took a swig.

Zac nodded with some annoyance. He knew just how easy it was to slip by unseen on this huge island, as that was exactly how he’d survived for over a month with a demon army around. And this cultist was likely far better at sneaking around than he ever was.

“But we did find the real David in a hidden basement beneath his home. He’s still alive, if barely. The physicians are working on him, and they don’t expect him to wake up for a few weeks. So, unfortunately, we won’t be able to get any real clues from him,” the demon continued.

Zac perked up at that. David was a good guy, and he hoped that he would pull through this calamity that had befallen him.

“Good. We’ll take a tour of the town later to see if I can spot any other shape-shifters. I need you to kill them, as I cannot gain any energy at the moment. But more importantly, I need you to accompany me somewhere,” Zac said.

“Spot them? How? Just what’s going on with you?” Ogras said skeptically.

Zac hesitated for a while, but he finally relented. Ogras knew about so many secrets of his already that it didn’t feel like another one would matter.

“Why don’t you just inspect me, and you’ll understand,” Zac said.

Since his pathways were gone, his skill [**Mental Barrier**] was no longer there either, which in and of itself was a problem that needed to be addressed.

“Are you playing with me? I can’t see shit,” Ogras said, a bit annoyed after a few seconds.

Zac was confused until he felt some warmth on his arm. It was the bangle from Greatest. It looked like hiding his core wasn’t the only function of the item. Instead, he shared the first rows of his status screens. Of course, it was only up to his alignment.

“What the hell?” Ogras said, shocked. “Level 1? Draugr? Miasma acting up, my ass.”

Zac only snorted and shared the Ladder next. “So it’s like this,” Zac started, and explained about his core and what he believed it meant.

Ogras only looked at him for a few seconds afterward until he shook his head with disgust and took a large swig of his wine. “I should just strap myself to your back, and sooner or later, a Divine Treasure will randomly land on my head. Your luck is just disgusting, makes me want to ram my head into a wall,” Ogras spat out.

Zac's lips slightly moved upward. It was always fun to get a rise out of the demon. "Well, you can try getting stabbed by the Corpselord's scythe if you want to try replicating it," Zac said.

"So why are you telling me all this?" Ogras said, not wanting to entertain Zac.

"I want to hunt an E-grade beast while still level 1," Zac said.

Ogras' eyes widened a bit. "You're going to perform the Legendary Hunt? I have to admit, that's a pretty good idea."

"Legendary Hunt?" Zac asked, confused.

"That's what it's called among demons. I heard that some families try for that title on the higher-grade planets. No one on my planet was ever close to trying it, though. It would be amazing if someone even managed to get a Dao Seed before embarking on the road of cultivation in Clan Azh'Rezak, for example, much less fighting an E-grade beast," Ogras explained.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Let's go," the demon added, actually looking a bit excited.

"Are there any other advantages you can think of I should do before moving past level 1?" Zac asked, just to make sure.

"There's none I can think of. If you didn't get any titles for having seeds or evolved race at this stage, the other low-level titles are likely not possible. The only other possible exploit I can think of is if you entering the Tower of Eternity after your main class already has evolved. You'd be able to run straight through it like a bull," Ogras said.

Zac's eyes lit up at that. As Ogras said, that might be the biggest exploit possible. Reaching the top floor of the Tower of Eternity should give insane rewards.

"Well, let's go, then. I want to reach as high a level as possible with this class before entering the Treasure Hunt," Zac said, heading to his private teleporter array.

Soon the two found themselves walking through the dense forest on Mystic Island, as Zac had decided to call the island with the entrance to the Mystic Realm. Zac had quickly found another use for his new sight upon entering the forest.

He could essentially spot any living creatures from a great distance away since they lit up the forest like a beacon due to their life force. It allowed them to avoid almost every battle as they walked toward the core.

Now and then, Ogras was forced to quickly and quietly kill a beast, though, as even with them avoiding beasts as much as they could, they were still spotted occasionally. But soon they found themselves at the edge of the crater, looking down at the forest beneath.

“Well, Mr. Hunter,” Ogras said, looking over at Zac with a grin, “let’s see if you have what it takes.”

The next moment, the two were swallowed by the shadows.



## APEX HUNTER

The two found themselves at the bottom of the crater, both warily looking around. Ogras had already covered them in a sphere of shadows, hiding their presence and muting their sounds.

“The Cosmic Energy here has an even higher density than the mountains of Port Atwood,” Ogras said with some surprise, his eyes shining with greed. “The Mystic Realm must be really thriving. Perhaps it’s a leftover herb garden of some powerhouse. We need to quickly stabilize it before all the energy leaks out, ruining the treasures inside.”

“Or it’s the home of a horde of D-grade monsters,” Zac said with a snort as he took out his axe. “Do you think the beast is close to the entrance or at the edge?”

“Being too close to the field is extremely dangerous, with shifting cracks between the dimensions appearing at random. If a crack opens where you stand, you’ll suddenly be split in two without a chance to react. The beast you heard should be somewhere near the edge of the barren field though since the energy would be densest there,” Ogras answered after some deliberation.

“Okay, let’s go.” Zac nodded.

The two warily made their way through the forest of the crater, but they were happy to note that it seemed completely deserted. There were some critters scuttling about, but they couldn’t find a single beast. Hopefully, it meant that the crater was the exclusive territory of the Lord of the Island.



It actually was easier than they expected to find their target. A huge tiger was lazily sunbathing on a hill not too far away from the core of the crater, its snores making the ground shake. It was roughly five meters long, but apart from its size and slightly dark hue, it didn't look much different from a normal tiger.

Clearly, it had grown lax after having the whole crater to itself, with no real rivals on the island. Zac hoped that meant that the beast simply was lucky to have had a good early start on the island, allowing it to capitalize on the best area to keep growing.

“Please take care of it if something wants to join the fight. But don't help me out unless I ask,” Zac said as he took a steadying breath.

Memories of his first real battle with a large beast resurfaced. It was his desperate struggle with Vul, the barghest alpha. The situation right now was a bit similar to that time, since he still hadn't possessed a class when fighting the first herald.

However, this time, he didn't feel ready to soil his pants from fear. Instead, Zac calmly looked the slumbering beast over for any clues to hidden aces. Since it was E-grade, it would have to have at least one Dao Seed, and Zac hoped it was an offensive one.

The natural defenses of E-grade beasts were high enough, and Zac wasn't sure he'd be able to kill the animal if it had something like the Dao of Toughness. He only had his body and his Daos at the moment, and no skills to amplify his powers.

“Good luck,” Ogras only said as he receded into the shadows.

Zac hid for another few moments and observed the snoring beast until he started to push the Miasma in his body down toward his legs. He had no skills to waste his Miasma on, so his energy would last quite long. However, entering a war of attrition against an evolved beast was playing with fire, so

Zac's goal was to get in and quickly kill the animal before it could retaliate.

He slowly inhaled and adjusted his grip on his axe before exploding into action.

He didn't have [**Loamwalker**] to push his speed to the limit, but he did have almost 350 strength to propel himself forward, each step creating an explosion of stone flying all over and leaving a crater in his wake.

He didn't expect to be able to sneak up on the beast, as it was completely out in the open, and the aura he passively emitted was much too conspicuous. Instead, he chose to ignore any attempts at stealth, instead pushing forward with maximum speed.

The tiger woke up with a start as he approached, but before it could orient itself, Zac was in melee range with his axe falling. A strike containing everything Zac could muster, and enhanced with the Dao of Sharpness, struck the throat of the tiger like a falling meteor. A significant chunk of his available Miasma was contained in that strike.

The power was so great that the beast was slammed into the ground, and a large, jagged rip could be seen. But to Zac's disappointment, the damage didn't look deadly. He didn't stop for a second and followed the swing by forcefully kicking the throat of the beast with all his accumulated speed and his Dao of Heaviness.

It sounded like something was damaged in the throat of the tiger as it gave out a weird gurgle of pain. But while the beast had been too lax about its security since it was all alone in the crater, it wasn't any pushover.

Weird cracks in space burst out from the animal, completely shattering the hill and the closest trees. Zac was affected as well, bloody wounds opening over all his exposed skin even before he could use his defensive gear. He was lucky that he had such a high Endurance; otherwise, he feared he would have been diced into small cubes by the attack.

He wasn't sure what the attack did, but its effect was similar to the Dao of Sharpness. However, he couldn't discern the attacks themselves, but only the results.

Even though Zac wasn't seriously hurt, he was briefly stopped by the weird wave, and the tiger capitalized on it to attack him with a fierce swipe. This time, Zac used his defensive charge to block it, but it cracked in no time.

The strike almost made Zac black out as he flew through the air. He had wrongly thought Dexterity was its main attribute since it was a feline beast, but clearly, it was Strength. To Zac's horror, he noticed he was actually flying toward the large field housing the Mystic Realm entrance.

Vicious cracks in space randomly spread all over the field, any one able to cut him into pieces without any effort. He knew no defensive measure would be able to put up the slightest resistance against a dimensional tear, and he immediately started sprinting back toward the tiger the moment he landed.

Zac thanked the stars for his high Luck attribute as he bobbed and weaved, going by his gut instinct, praying that a tear wouldn't crop up right inside his body. Luckily the cracks weren't too densely spread at the edge of the field, leaving decent wiggle room to get out. He kept running and jumping around until he finally reached the edge of the clearing.

However, Zac's brows furrowed when he noticed the tiger standing in wait just at the edge of the clearing. Their eyes locked for a second, and Zac roared as he jumped straight at it. The tiger roared straight back, and it was clear that it wanted to swat him back into the lethal field.

The beast understood just how dangerous it was close to the entrance, and it tried to have the dimensional tears do its work for it. Zac didn't flinch at the incoming paw but instead unleashed his Dao Field for his Seed of Heaviness to the fullest just before he arrived at the monster.

The odd mental Heaviness from his Dao froze the tiger for a split second, and that was all that Zac needed as he passed by the incoming paw and embedded his axe into the left eye.

Immediately after, he plunged a tomahawk into the other eye of the beast with his left arm, completely blinding it.

The tiger wailed in pain and started to thrash all over, and Zac swiftly jumped out of the way. Its throat was still bleeding, but Zac knew it wouldn't be enough. With a sigh, he waited a bit for an opening, once again jumping in to attack the same spot on its throat as before.

Since he'd managed to blind the beast, the fight was essentially over, though it took a couple of sneak attacks until the tiger finally bled out. It also managed to get in another decent swipe at Zac when he attacked, though this time, he wasn't punched into the field of dimensional tears.

Zac sat down next to the corpse of the tiger, heavily panting, letting the System drown him with a deluge of refreshing power from gaining multiple levels. Felling an E-grade beast at level 1 was no joke, even if many factors were in his favor. This tiger was on the bottom rung as far as evolved beasts went, but a kill was a kill.

He was pretty spent, so he took out a crystal as he opened his status screen, but he quickly threw the crystal away after it felt like his hand caught on fire. Confused, he looked down at it, only to realize his mistake. He had suspected this might be the result, which was why he also hadn't dared activate his Dao of Trees so far.

He had been occupied with checking out the results from his battle, and had forgotten to pick out the correct type. He quickly swapped out his Nexus Crystal with an F-grade Miasma Crystal and once again opened his menu.

**Name: Zachary Atwood**

**Level: 22**

**Class: —**

**Race: [E] Draugr**

**Alignment: [Earth] Port Atwood - Lord**

**Titles: Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David,**

**Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer,  
Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being,  
Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary  
Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor  
Noblesse, Core, Apex Hunter**

**Dao: Seed of Heaviness – Middle, Seed of Trees –  
High, Seed of Sharpness – Early**

**Core: [F] Duplicity**

**Strength: 344 [Increase: 55%. Efficiency: 110%]**

**Dexterity: 162 [Increase: 40%. Efficiency: 110%]**

**Endurance: 220 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 110%]**

**Vitality: 188 [Increase: 40%. Efficiency: 110%]**

**Intelligence: 90 [Increase: 40%. Efficiency: 110%]**

**Wisdom: 85 [Increase: 40%. Efficiency: 110%]**

**Luck: 93 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 110%]**

**Free Points: 42**

**Nexus Coins: 21,533,653**

The experience gain was extraordinary, pushing him straight to level 22, just three levels shy of level 25. He also sensed that he wasn't too far off from gaining another level as well. It was just crazy to think that one kill was equal to all the pain and struggle he'd underwent the first month up until killing Vul.

But that was simply how things worked; the difference in Cosmic Energy gained between different level beasts was far higher compared to the difference in Nexus Coins gained. It was the same with the amount of energy needed to gain another level, as it increased exponentially.

However, Zac was a bit confused as he looked at his status screen. His attributes were exactly the same as before, and while he could spot his new title, he hadn't gained a single attribute point from it.

Instead, there was a lot of new information added to the attributes on his status screen. The “Increased” was pretty straightforward, since some quick addition in his head proved they were equivalent to the sum of his old titles. But what was this new thing, Efficiency?

He quickly focused on his new title to see what was going on.

**[Apex Hunter: Solo kill enemy one whole tier above you. Reward: Effect of Attributes +10%]**

Zac’s brows rose in surprise since this was something he hadn’t encountered before.

“Nice fight. You looked very heroic jumping back and forth to avoid the cracks like a monkey,” Ogras said as he emerged from the shadows.

“Whatever. It worked, didn’t it?” Zac snorted. “More importantly, take a look at this. What does this mean?”

He displayed his new title to Ogras, who whistled in surprise. “So it’s a high-tier title. Should have figured,” Ogras muttered.

“High-tier title?” Zac asked, confused.

Of course he knew that some titles were better than others, but he never had heard of any classification like this.

“Yeah. Low-tier titles give static rewards. They are good in the beginning to help accumulate other advantages, but by the end of E-grade class, they are mostly worthless apart from those that give Luck. The mid-tier gives the percentage boosts. These are what most people desperately try to gain, as they will always be useful.

“Next are the high-tiered ones, which also give percentage boosts. But these titles work differently. Efficiency improves how much you benefit from each attribute point. For example, with 50% increased Strength Efficiency you are 50% stronger than your attribute points would indicate. And these titles do this independently of each other. The effect can get enormous.”

Zac understood what he meant. This was a top-tier title that worked just like his Hatchetman's Rage skill. Instead of boosting his base attribute, it instead increased the effect of the attribute. This boost was far better, especially for him, who already had a bunch of percent-based boosts. "Not bad," was all Zac said as he placed his axe in the wound of the tiger that still bled profusely. "Are there any other ways to gain even more Efficiency?"

"I remember grandpa mentioning that Daos start providing Efficiency after evolving beyond Dao Seeds. Cultivation Manuals essentially improve one's Efficiency as well, but that doesn't help you, I guess," Ogras slowly said. "There are probably other ways as well, but Daos and Titles are the most common methods to improve it."

Zac nodded in understanding before he focused on the beast carcass. It wasn't a top-tier beast, but he wouldn't turn his nose up at the blood of an E-grade animal, and clearly, neither did his axe. It greedily sucked in a good deal of blood, and it actually started humming and vibrating. But soon it calmed down again, and the sounds stopped.

"It's almost there," Ogras commented from the side.

Zac nodded with anticipation as he tucked away his axe. He would have to ask the explorers to keep their eyes open for more E-grade beasts lurking on the islands they visited. Most of them in his territory were still unexplored, after all.

"So what now?" Ogras asked curiously.

"I need to gain a couple of quick levels before the Treasure Hunt. You can go back if you want," Zac said.

His goal was to attain a class first, then figure out how to turn himself back into a human.

"Sure, but I'll take a leg of this guy. I deserve a nice meal as compensation for acting as bodyguard," he said as a couple of shadows severed one of the tiger's hind legs after some effort.

Zac only smiled as he stored the rest of the tiger. For the following two days, there was a new apex predator on the

island, sneaking from territory to territory like a deadly specter. When Zac finally left, it was as though a terrible pressure had left the island, and the beasts could once again go about their lives.





## CLASSES

Zac eagerly rushed toward his Nexus Node, unable to contain his excitement. He was truly curious about what kinds of classes he could expect from his new race. It was, in a way, both a test run for his level 75 evolution, and a testament to his struggles so far.

If he had Epic classes available now, it would mean he was on course for Epic E-grade classes down the road. Of course, he knew that the criterion for getting an E-grade Epic class was much higher than an F-grade one, but it was a start.

He soon found himself in the building containing his private Nexus Node, and opened up his menu one last time to see everything was in order.

**Name: Zachary Atwood**

**Level: 25**

**Class: —**

**Race: [E] Draugr**

**Alignment: [Earth] Port Atwood - Lord**

**Titles: Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Core, Apex Hunter**

**Dao: Seed of Heaviness – Middle, Seed of Trees – High, Seed of Sharpness – Early**

**Core: [F] Duplicity**

**Strength: 352 [Increase: 55%. Efficiency: 110%]**

**Dexterity: 200 [Increase: 40%. Efficiency: 110%]**

**Endurance: 245 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 110%]**

**Vitality: 188 [Increase: 40%. Efficiency: 110%]**

**Intelligence: 90 [Increase: 40%. Efficiency: 110%]**

**Wisdom: 85 [Increase: 40%. Efficiency: 110%]**

**Luck: 93 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 110%]**

**Free Points: 0**

**Nexus Coins: 22,508,653**

The boost of 48 free points was a huge gain for three days of grinding. He'd already spent them all, putting 5 points in strength, 27 into Dexterity, and 16 into Endurance. The Strength was to pass 350, which might help unlock some special class, and the others were simply to keep his build balanced. It was just as well since he was running a bit behind on his Dexterity, something he had been able to clearly feel in his battle with Average.

But before he could touch the crystal, he sensed a familiar presence, and he turned around.

“Just watching the excitement,” Ogras said with a small smile.

“If you got the opportunity to get a second class, what would you want it to be?” Zac asked, curious if the demon had come to the same conclusion as he himself had during the past days.

“Hmm... I would likely want a hybrid mage class also focusing on shadows,” Ogras said after some hesitation.

“Oh?” Zac said, a bit surprised.

It actually was somewhat different from what Zac had expected.

“My shadow attacks benefit from Intelligence and Wisdom, even though I am mainly a Dexterity class. Two classes focusing on the same concept would also allow me to walk further down the path of shadows instead of splitting my attention,” Ogras explained.

Zac felt it was a distinct possibility the demon had thought it over since hearing of Zac’s opportunity. It was a well-thought-out answer that would have a high chance of having long-term benefits, and was somewhat of a low-risk choice.

But all theorizing was useless if he couldn’t get the type of class he hoped for. It was time to see what the System thought of him. Without waiting any further, he simply touched the crystal, and it immediately started the class choice. Zac let out a sigh of relief before checking the new window that appeared, since he hadn’t been sure it would work until now.

**[Top 5 Class choices]**

***[Reaver – F-Grade, Rare. A roving army of one, filled with unrelenting violence. Upgradeable.]***

***[Greenfingers – F-Grade, Rare. Keeper of the grove. Defender of nature. Upgradeable.]***

***[Undertaker – F-Grade, Rare. With only the trees and the dead for company. Upgradeable.]***

***[Undying Bulwark – F-Grade, Epic. Unbreakable. Unflinching. Unrelenting. The Undying marches forward. Upgradeable.]***

***[Big Game Hunter – F-Grade, Epic. Dragons, Primordials, or the Abyssal Behemoths –They all look good above the mantel. Upgradeable.]***

**[Random F-grade Class. 0% Common. 25.0% Uncommon. 44.2 % Rare. 30.8% Epic. Roll the dice.]**

A grin spread across Zac’s face as he saw the choices, making Ogras snort in annoyance from the side. The demon couldn’t see the available options, but he could likely make an educated guess. There wasn’t even the option to follow Alyn’s advice and pick a lower rarity class.

His options were clearly far superior to his first round, and he even had two choices for Epic classes. It was what he'd hoped for, and a sort of validation for his ceaseless struggles of the past months.

Still, Zac seriously looked through each and every class, since even the worst one was of Rare rarity, and none would be a garbage class. It was quite annoying that the System provided no proper clues for the classes, and he had to perform some guesswork.

Reaver sounded like a stronger warrior class, much like his Hatchetman class. It was likely awarded due to his consistent fighting style. While it clearly was suited to Zac's attributes, it felt like it brought nothing new to the table, and he unhesitatingly looked at the next one.

He was unsure of what the main attribute of Greenfingers would be. But getting the option was likely based on his high Dao of Trees, which might mean it was a Vitality class. It should use nature to fight, and perhaps be useful in growing Spiritual Herbs. While it was an interesting option, he had no clue how that kind of class would work with an undead race, so he passed on it as well.

Undertaker was the next choice. Zac felt it touched upon multiple parts of his skill set and had some connection to death. The problem was that while it felt fitting, he had a hard time imagining what it would provide to him. The System really was too stingy with its explanation of its classes.

That left the final two choices, the Epic classes. Big Game Hunter should come from him gaining the Apex Hunter title. Hunter classes were generally Dexterity-based and would likely make a great addition to his Hatchetman class.

Currently, Dexterity was the attribute he put most of his free points in just so that he would be able to keep up with his ever-growing Strength. Getting a dex-focused class was one of the main ideas he had, and getting an Epic one would be a huge help.

It would also likely broaden his arsenal for attacks, perhaps adding ranged capabilities through a bow. All in all, it

would make him more well-rounded, and the attributes would complement his Hatchetman class well.

It even had a somewhat matching theme with Hatchetman, as a hunter could be considered nature-related. That would be convenient in the future, as improving one Dao might benefit both classes.

The final choice was the Undying Bulwark class. From the description, it seemed to be an undead-specific class that should focus on Endurance or Vitality. This was actually the second route he had formulated over the past days while hunting.

At first, he had thought of gaining a mage class to balance out his low attributes in that area. That would also help with ranged attacks, just like a hunter class. But he'd reluctantly put that idea to the side.

He didn't believe that there would be any synergy between his two builds if he did that, leaving him with two strong archetypes. But he would rather focus on one archetype and push it to its very limits. He therefore wanted to go with another warrior class that would complement Hatchetman.

Another Strength-based class didn't seem like a good idea, as it would add nothing and make his attributes too lopsided. That left either an assassin class or a tank class, to borrow from gaming terms.

Either of them would boost another of his important attributes and leave him with free points to shore up his shortcomings, making him a monstrous melee fighter. If he picked Big Game Hunter, he likely wouldn't need to put any more points in Dexterity. That would leave him the freedom to either focus on becoming even more lethal or shoring up his defenses with his free points.

It was a very flexible path where he could adjust his build as he went. Conversely, the undying class would likely help with his survivability, but it would also mean that he would have to keep putting most of his free points into Dexterity to not become too slow.

Both seemed like good options, and he felt like there was no clear winner. As for the lottery option, he didn't even consider it. There was no chance to get an Arcane class, which was the tier above Epic. And while the chance for an Epic class was great, there was no point since he had two great options to choose from.

But after a few minutes, his eyes turned to Undying Bulwark, and he picked that one with determination in his eyes.

It came down to suitability in the end. Zac had his hands full just with improving his current fighting style. Learning to fight with a bow or sneak around wasn't really his style and would take focus from his axe techniques. The meathead juggernaut battle tactics were already ingrained into his brain, and the Undying Bulwark class felt more appropriate for that.

Besides, he was making a gamble for the long run. Right now, his two sides were completely separated, but who knew what would happen in the future. If he somehow managed to combine the two classes, or at least use their skills simultaneously, Undying Bulwark should be a better choice.

A defensive class would complement Hatchetman far better than another offensive class like a hunter as he saw it. It would also allow Zac to focus even further on evolving one side into pure offense, and the other into pure defense.

He might have made a different choice if this was his only class, as Undying Bulwark might not be the greatest offensively, which would affect his leveling ability. But with the help of his massive attribute pool, he felt he would still be stronger offensively than most people. Furthermore, if needed, he could get a great offensive skill from Brazla.

The familiar burst of Cosmic Energy inundated him, and his mind was filled with the schematic for the pathways that belonged to Undying Bulwark. He was about to check his gains, but Ogras interrupted him from behind.

“So what did you get?” Ogras asked.

“None of your business,” Zac said with a snort. “I still don’t know what class you have.”

Ogras only tsiked, muttering something about being stingy.

“I need to fix my pathways; then we’ll try to hunt down the shape-shifters,” Zac said.

“Fine,” Ogras said with a nod and disappeared.

Zac remembered just how painful it was to draw his pathways, so he needed to seclude himself to make sure nothing went wrong. He immediately headed toward his courtyard so he could activate the arrays there.

As he walked, he finally opened his menu to see the results.

**[Class: Undying Bulwark, Grade F, Epic]**

**Endurance +10, +10%.**

**Vitality +5, +5%.**

**Level: +6 Endurance, +2 Vitality, -1 free point per level.**

**Skills:**

**Bulwark Mastery (LOCKED)**

**Deathwish (LOCKED)**

**Fields of Despair (LOCKED)**

Zac’s brows rose in surprise. It actually stole one of his free points rather than give out another one. But it still gave a total of 7 points per level, compared to the 5 from Hatchetman.

At least one thing was clear. He probably wouldn’t need to put any more points into Endurance in a long time, perhaps ever. Six points per level was an insane boost, twice what he got in Strength from Hatchetman. Add to that the point he got from his other class, and soon his enemies would tire themselves out before they could even hurt him.

It also gave three skills that were available right from the start, and he’d need to complete some quests to unlock them.



He honestly had no idea what the two last ones would do. The first one was a mastery skill, just like his current Axe Mastery.

However, he wasn't exactly sure what Bulwark meant in this connotation. But there was a real possibility that it might be a quest that would give him a new Dao Seed. Since he got an Epic class, he was guaranteed to get at least one new seed from a skill vision.

But before he could set out to complete his skill quests, there was something else he needed to do. As soon as he arrived at his courtyard, Zac closed it down with multiple layers of arrays before he sat down.

Next he started to arduously imprint the intricate pathway system that would cover his whole body. Luckily, he hadn't already imprinted a simplistic version of a pathway system that would need to be rewritten, so this time, it wasn't nearly as painful.

But even then, the pathways took the better part of a day to imprint, as they were even more intricate compared to his other class. Early the next morning, he stood up and happily studied the results of his efforts.

The fractals that passed through his whole body were reminiscent of that of Hatchetman, but they were also a bit different. The best way Zac could describe it was that they were like two abstract paintings, each conveying a different meaning to the subconscious.

As he inspected the results of his efforts, his eyes also turned toward the core. While he had engraved the fractals all night, he didn't want to split his focus, so he hadn't checked up on it. But throughout the night, the core hadn't given off a single response, staying completely inert.

But unbeknownst to him, his core had changed as well during the night, and the black side now also contained grooves for the pathways to his new class. Now his core was truly complete.



## MASOCHISM

Finally done with the imprinting process, Zac checked out the status screen.

**Name: Zachary Atwood**

**Level: 25**

**Class: [F-Epic] Undying Bulwark**

**Race: [E] Draugr**

**Alignment: [Earth] Port Atwood – Lord**

**Titles: Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen**

**Dao: Seed of Heaviness – Middle, Seed of Trees – High, Seed of Sharpness – Early**

**Core: [F] Duplicity**

**Strength: 352 [Increase: 55%. Efficiency: 116%]**

**Dexterity: 200 [Increase: 40%. Efficiency: 116%]**

**Endurance: 284 [Increase: 55%. Efficiency: 116%]**

**Vitality: 202 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 116%]**

**Intelligence: 90 [Increase: 40%. Efficiency: 116%]**

**Wisdom: 85 [Increase: 40%. Efficiency: 116%]**

**Luck: 93 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 116%]**

**Free Points: 0**

**Nexus Coins: [F] 22,508,653**

It was clear that his survivability had increased quite a bit due to the increase in Endurance and Vitality. But what he found a bit surprising was that his attribute effectiveness had increased by 6%. A quick look at his list of titles showed that there could only be two reasons.

He was a bit disappointed that there didn't seem to be a title for gaining dual classes, but he soon understood a likely reason for this. His core title had changed name and was now called Duplicity Core instead. He quickly opened it up to see if anything else had changed about it.

**[Duplicity Core: Successfully form a Duplicity Core. Reward: Strength +5%, Endurance +5%.]**

It looked like he had been wrong in his assumptions earlier. The reason question marks had remained earlier was that he still hadn't received a second class to imprint on the core. Each reward corresponded to the main attribute of one of his classes, and there was nothing to reward until he had both of them.

**[Heaven's Chosen: Attain highest possible tier of class. Reward: Effect of Attributes +5%.]**

The second title was the reason for his increased attribute effectiveness. Zac knew that Epic wasn't the highest grade there was, as there were multiple higher grades above it. The title rather meant that Epic truly was the highest possible tier for an F-grade Class.

**Bulwark Mastery (Class): Mastery is born through battle. Block 5,000 strikes. Reward: Bulwark Mastery Skill (0/5,000).**

**Deathwish (Class): The body is but another shield. Receive 5,000 strikes. Reward: Deathwish Skill (0/5,000).**

**Fields of Despair (Class): Draw the ire of at least 1,000 enemies at once. Reward: Fields of Despair (0/1).**

The next thing Zac checked out was the skill quests to see how hard they would be to accomplish. He could only blankly stare at the first two. He should have figured that the skills for a tank class would mean getting hit. At first glance, he thought the first two could be solved simultaneously, but he soon realized that might not be the case.

While the quest mission for **[Deathwish]** might look like it could be accomplished while doing the first one, he believed that he would actually have to get hit with his body. In any case, it looked like he would need to recruit some people to beat him up.

He felt the last one would be the easiest. Had he gotten this class before Hatchetman, he would have had a huge problem completing it, but now it was only a matter of jumping over to the undead incursion. That brought up the question of whether the undead would even attack him while in this form, though. But if he started to kill a bunch of zombies, they should retaliate.

In any case, Zac felt that he would be able to complete all of the quests in less than a day as long as he got enough people to hit him simultaneously. He wanted to try it out immediately and headed over to his sister's courtyard.

It was still around 4 a.m., so Zac assumed she still would be at home asleep. But to his surprise, he found her meditating while facing the sunrise. Zac remembered how annoying it was to get interrupted in the middle of attaining insights into the Dao, so he silently sat down behind her and waited.

He soon closed his eyes as well, starting to meditate on the Dao. He had gained an idea while hunting at Mystic Island. He had been wondering just what that weird attack from the tiger had been until he realized it was a coarse mimicry of the dimensional tears.

The beast had likely been lying on its hill and observed the dimensional scars in the field for months until it finally gained

some insight into it. That in and of itself was an extremely impressive task, as the Dao of Space was one of the highest concepts, according to Ogras.

Zac had felt that if a dumb beast could do it, then so could he. That was why it took a whole day before he left the island. Most of it had been sitting and observing the everchanging cracks.

They were a truly fickle and random force of nature, popping up without rhyme or reason. Wherever they showed up, space was simply separated, and anything that was there before was cut into two. Zac didn't hold any hope in actually comprehending the concept of a void edge for his Dao of Sharpness, but something simpler.

It was the randomness and instantaneous speed with which the cracks appeared. He felt that speed was an important aspect of sharpness. If he moved extremely slowly, he wouldn't be able to cut a blade of grass with his axe, but if he swung his arm as quickly as possible, he could cut a small hill in two without harming his edge.

Sharpness through speed. His blade would be like the dimensional tears, where his enemies would be cut in two before they knew they were attacked. This was the concept he kept pondering on as he waited for his sister to finish her morning meditation.

"Shit!" Zac suddenly heard after an hour or so, making him open his eyes.

Kenzie stared at him aghast with her hand over her heart. "You scared the crap out of me. Why did you sneak up here like that?" she said with a glare.

"Sorry, I didn't want to disturb your meditation," Zac answered a bit awkwardly. "I'll make it up to you. Go ahead and hit me."

"I'm not going to hit you," Kenzie said with a roll of her eyes. "Going by what a blockhead you are, I'd just hurt my hands."

Zac only smiled a bit and then showed her the quest window for **[Deathwish]**. “This is a onetime offer,” Zac said.

“What a weird quest. Just what kind of class did you get?” Kenzie asked with her brows rising.

“Well, it’s an Endurance-based class to help with my survivability. Most of the quests seem to be centered around getting hit,” Zac explained with a sigh.

A tinge of something flashed in Kenzie’s eyes before she reined it in. “Well, I am a mage, so I can’t punch you. My hands would break long before I hit you five thousand times. Would spells work?” she asked, starting to look a bit excited.

“Well, I’m not sur–” Zac said, but didn’t get further before a fireball slammed into his chest.

Zac grunted and took a step backward by reflex, but he wasn’t actually hurt. It was clear there was no real power in the strike.

“Well?” Kenzie asked with a wide smile.

Zac threw his sister a glare before opening up his quest screen again. But to his disappointment, the quest was still at 0/5,000.

“Didn’t work,” Zac said with a frown, taking out the club he used for nonlethal confrontations. “Try with this instead.”

His sister didn’t say anything, but her mouth curved even further upward as she accepted the club. She swung the bat at his chest like she was trying to hit a home run, but even that had no effect on the quest, as the progress was still at zero.

“Perhaps your robe is stopping it?” Kenzie hesitantly said.

Zac nodded and took off the top half of his clothes, leaving his chest bare. He felt Kenzie made sense. It wouldn’t be much of a death wish if his E-grade defensive gear soaked up all the damage. His sister swung the club once again, and this time, Zac couldn’t help but grimace from the pain.

But luckily, it worked, and it counted as progress. The two of them kept trying various things out for over an hour and

found out that there were only two requirements to gain progress on his quest.

First, he needed to be hit right on his skin. Even if he only wore a T-shirt, it didn't count as progress. Zac really hoped that didn't mean that he would have to walk around bare-chested to use the skill in the future. It was already a pain to walk around barefoot due to his movement skill. If this kept up, he would soon be forced to walk around naked to have access to all his skills.

Secondly, there needed to be a minimum amount of force in the strike for it to count. Just a small love tap wasn't enough. With Kenzie's low physical attributes, she needed to give it everything she had in a swing to make it count, and even then, it was a crapshoot whether it was enough or not.

Spells did work, though, and Zac's chest was red and bruised from being blasted with ice balls as large as a fist. As for Kenzie, she sat on the ground, looking a bit pale, absorbing Cosmic Energy from a Nexus Crystal.

"What's going on?" a sleepy voice could be heard from outside, making Zac turn over to see a bleary-eyed Emily enter.

Zac quickly took out a pair of sunglasses from his pouch and put them on. His pitch-black eyes were the most obvious indicator something was up with him, and he didn't want to show the teenager his change just yet.

It wasn't that he didn't trust Emily, but she was an obvious point of weakness to him since she still couldn't cultivate and protect herself. Luckily, she only went between the academy with many warriors and his area that was long since protected with arrays.

Since the outer town didn't really need any protection at the moment, the town defense array had stayed where it was. It covered the inner area so that no one could just jump over the walls and head to his compound or spy on the Creators.

It was a constant drain on resources, but not a large one as long as no one attacked it, but he felt it was extremely worth it.



The whole reason he even created the town was to protect his close ones. Who knew, if it hadn't been running, it might have been his sister who had been replaced by a shape-shifter rather than David.

"We're training," Zac said, trying to modulate his voice to sound less ghastly. "I have a quest to get hit a bunch of times."

"Wow! Can I help?" the teenager said, immediately perking up.

"No, Kenzie is barely able to hit hard enough for it to count," Zac said with a shake of his head.

"Damnit, why wasn't I born in spring?" she muttered in annoyance.

Zac just rolled his eyes at the teenager in response.

"Perhaps I can be of assistance?" a voice said as the shadows congealed, showing a smiling Ogras.

Zac started to feel that all the people close to him had some sadistic streaks, each of them sporting an eerily similar smile.

"Just get on with it," Zac said with a shake of his head. "And you all don't need to look so pleased about it."

Three hours later, Zac walked along the streets of Port Atwood accompanied by the demon, one looking sullen and the other having a refreshing smile on his face. Every part of Zac's chest felt sore, but at least the quest was finished.

He wondered just how one was supposed to complete that quest without attributes like his. If he'd been hit five thousand times with the same power as the last hours when he was actually level 25, he would have died ten times over.

Even with his current attributes, they were forced to take a couple of breaks where Zac swallowed a healing pill. But at least it was done with. And he had to admit the skill he received was pretty interesting.

**[Deathwish – Proficiency: Early. Join your foes in a dance of death. Upgradeable.]**

Just like the quest, the point of the skill was simply to get hit. Even then, he would probably categorize **[Deathwish]** as an offensive skill. The point of it wasn't to decrease the damage he took, but rather retaliate in kind.

The skill was passive, costing some Miasma every second, and for every strike Zac received while it was active, his assailant was hit right back. It looked pretty spooky with a shadowy copy of the attacker that was instantaneously created when Zac was struck, which struck right back.

Ogras had taken it as a challenge to dodge, but no matter what he did, he couldn't escape getting struck when he landed a hit on Zac. The only option to avoid getting retaliated was to stop the attack or simultaneously defend as he attacked. That was why the demon looked like he carried a grudge as they walked through the streets.

The bad news was that only a part, around 10 to 20 percent, of the original strike was retaliated. But the good news was that calculation was based on the original power of the attack, not the damage Zac received after his sturdy constitution had lessened the damage he took.

That essentially meant that if his Endurance got high enough, he could just stand in a field of enemies and let them kill themselves by hitting him. The skill also took very little energy to keep going and was something he would be able to run for the entire duration of the fight on top of using his normal skills.

All in all, it felt like a fitting start for someone slowly turning into a walking fortress.



## EXPERIMENTATION

Zac also figured out how to advance his quest for [**Bulwark Mastery**]. There were various ways to block a strike, but the only one that seemed to work was using a shield.

Unfortunately, he only had an old rusty shield he'd pilfered when he'd hunted the imp herald in the tunnels. It only lasted for five blows at the required power before it broke. That forced them to stop grinding his quest for the moment and instead focus on the other tasks at hand. There were infiltrators to hunt.

By now, it was close to 8 a.m., which was a good time to hunt for shape-shifters. Most people were starting their day, heading out toward either their work or the academy. The sight was almost blinding to Zac, as everyone on the street was lit up like a beacon of life force.

But Zac inspected each and every one from beneath his hood, not wanting to let anyone slip by. So far, they hadn't found a single shape-shifter, which was both troubling and a relief. The problem was that they had no idea just how many were still on the island.

According to Ogras, there had been a mass exodus of the cultists when Ogras had decapitated their leader. A good portion of them immediately ran for the Nexus Crystal and teleported away. A few others, likely the more pious ones, had wanted to avenge their fallen leader, even to the point of self-destruction.

Ogras hadn't stayed at that time, instead heading over to the undead incursion to pick up Zac. When the demon later returned to farm the stronger invaders for contribution points, the crystals had disappeared, and only some stragglers were left.

They simply had no idea what had happened between the moment the two of them fled until when Ogras returned. For all they knew, there might be a whole contingent of lizardmen hiding in the woods somewhere, though that seemed unlikely.

The remaining cultists had been swarmed by undead almost as soon as the Corpselord fled, and they had been barely holding on when Ogras arrived. As for the black golemoids, if there had been any stragglers, they were killed by the uncountable zombies as well. But it seemed that their leader had already ordered his troops to fall back before heading over for one last try at Zac's head.

But since one shape-shifter was still skulking around on his island, there could be more. Zac and Ogras therefore patrolled the whole town twice, including the commercial district and the academy. At least it appeared that no shape-shifters had replaced anyone else in the town proper or any key personnel.

Zac also took the time to visit the unconscious David, and a surge of rage almost clouded his vision when Zac saw him. Even after a few days of intensive care, he still looked like he was on the brink of starvation, with his whole body covered in scars. The shape-shifter had thoroughly tortured the poor man, likely to gain the intelligence needed to keep up its charade.

After two hours of patrolling, Ogras was clearly bored, and Zac was forced to give up for now. Since he had to prepare for the Treasure Hunt, he tasked Ogras with devising some method to cleanse the island from any interlopers.

That left Zac to figure out what to do next. There weren't too many days left until the Treasure Hunt, and he had a hard time deciding what he should do. He wanted to start experimenting to become a human again so that he could gain access to his offensive skills.

But at the same time, he was unsure of how often he could change his form. If he changed now, he might not be able to freely change back, which meant he wouldn't be able to farm any more levels before the Treasure Hunt.

Since Undying Bulwark was an Epic class, every level would come with a huge number of attributes from now on, each one giving a great boost to his survivability. If he went all out for the following three days, leaving the last day to swap back to human, Zac expected that he would be able to gain between five and ten levels.

He'd already decided to skip getting the other two skills for now. He had no shield that could last him through the quest at the moment, and he honestly didn't dare step through the teleporter to Mount Everlasting Peace as he was right now.

He was afraid those tens of thousands of scripts on the mountain would blaze to life and smite him out of existence if he appeared. He knew that the mountain itself had been instrumental in fending off and defeating the undead armies that had tried to raze it.

After some hesitation, he first went to the Thayer Consortium to speak with Calrin. The gnome was shocked enough to fall out of his chair when he saw Zac's appearance, and it took some time to calm him down.

"Odd choice of a skill, transforming into an undead," the Sky Gnome muttered.

"I thought it would be a good skill to infiltrate the undead incursion, but changing back is harder than I expected," Zac said with a smile as he took out the huge horn from the Star Ox from his pouch. "In any case, I'd like you to take a look at this."

"Hmm, pretty," Calrin said as he looked at the horn with interest until he looked up at Zac. "What kind of beast is it from?"

"It's from an animal called a Star Ox. I got teleported off-world for a quest and fought the beast then. Apparently, the

horn is the most valuable part of it. Do you know what it's used for?"

"No idea," Calrin said with a shrug. "But it contains a lot of energy, even though the beast is dead. I'm sure that it can be used for either weapon-making or alchemy."

"I met a person over there who said it's worth around a hundred million Nexus Coins, so it should be something good. See if you can find out more," Zac said.

"Sure. Anything else?" Calrin asked.

"I need a shield, a real sturdy one," Zac continued.

"A shield? And I guess something that's stronger than what can be made on our island?" the gnome probed.

"Yes. Preferably a Spirit Tool like my axe. Is it obtainable?" Zac asked.

"Probably not. Defensive Spirit Tools are far rarer compared to offensive ones. And shields are even less common," the gnome said.

"Why?" Zac asked confused.

"It's more popular to have amulets, skills, or inscribed clothes for defense compared to a shield. Of course, those are much more limited, but they also don't slow you down at all," the gnome explained.

"No one really wants to waste the effort on creating a shield. They are extremely expensive and hard to make, since they need to be able to endure strong attacks not just once, but continuously. Very few materials can handle that," Calrin continued. "So they are generally only made to order. You would need to visit a skilled blacksmith, but that's impossible at the moment since we're stuck on this planet."

Zac nodded with some defeat. It was true what the gnome said. He'd only encountered two people amongst the demons who used shields as far as he could remember, and both were common foot soldiers.

"Well, keep your eyes open, just in case," Zac said without much hope as he stood up.

“Sure. Remember to get some alliances while finding treasures. We need that extra income,” the gnome said with a wave.

Since he couldn't get a shield at the moment, he decided to focus on gaining a few levels before the Treasure Hunt. He walked back to his compound and took the teleporter to Mystic Island. He wasn't afraid that he would run out of prey here, as the island was just enormous, and there should be millions of strong prey to hunt.

Even though time was of the essence, Zac spent a good chunk of the following three days also looking at the rifts in space, trying to glean some insight into his Dao of Sharpness. He wanted to improve it before the hunt to increase his offensive power, but if he could evolve it naturally, he could use his Dao Treasure on one of his other seeds.

In the end, he spent fourteen hours a day roving through the inner circle of the island, killing one powerful monster after another before he went down in the crater and pondered on the Dao for eight hours.

He gained three levels within the first day, but after that, his speed slowed down, only improving with another two the following day and one final level the third day. It was partly due to the requirements increasing, but mainly that it was getting harder and harder to find any good prey.

Finally, after three days passed, he had to call it. There was only one day before the hunt, and he needed to get ready.

His killing spree had pushed his endurance all the way to 349, almost overtaking his strength as his highest attribute. Interestingly enough, it also seemed that **[Verun's Bite]** was finally satiated, no longer wanting to drink the blood of the new beasts it encountered. However, it still wasn't evolving, making Zac guess that he still needed to find more E-grade beasts.

Unfortunately, he didn't manage to make much headway on his Dao, and he knew he would have to use his Dao Treasure for it after he got home. Since he'd decided he was done, he quickly headed toward the hidden camp to teleport



back. Finally home, he left a message for Kenzie telling her he was back and to come over after she woke up, before once again settling himself in his courtyard.

A large reason he'd dared to wait until the day before the Treasure Hunt to experiment with turning back was that he had found some clues to turning during his fight with the tiger. That battle had almost completely exhausted all his Miasma, and at that point, he'd felt that the Duplicity Core was starting to wake up.

It was in line with how he'd turned the first time, with his life force being stolen by the dagger. The only problem was that when he got close to running out of Miasma, he started to feel like he was about to die and that the remaining Miasma in his body was all that prevented his true death.

It was a weird distinction Zac hadn't realized before now. The Miasma was not only the source of power in battle but also the source of life for the undead. If Zac ran out of Cosmic Energy in a fight, he would feel weak, but he would be fine after resting.

But running out of Miasma for an undead seemed to be a death sentence. It gave a new meaning to the expression tired to death. He needed to find out if his theory was correct, but it would be crazy not to take some precautions.

It took an hour before Kenzie came to his courtyard after reading his note, and Zac immediately erected the arrays before taking out an E-grade Divine Crystal and an E-grade Miasma Crystal.

"I am going to try to turn back into a human now," Zac explained. "If it looks like I'm dying, try using the Divine Crystal first. If it doesn't work, try the Miasma Crystal."

"Are you sure about this?" Kenzie hesitantly asked as she picked up the two crystals.

"Pretty much," Zac lied. "I just want you here as a precaution. Here I go."

The next moment, Zac started to expel his Miasma through his whole body, and a cloud of death-attuned Cosmic Energy

formed above him. When he was reaching the last of his miasmic reserves, he was overcome with a sense of dread, and he instinctually wanted to reabsorb the energy in the air before it dissipated.

But he ignored his instincts and expelled the last of his Miasma. As the last of the energy left him, everything turned black, and the last thing he felt before losing consciousness was falling down.

The next thing Zac felt was a burning fire in his belly. He didn't know if he'd been unconscious for a second or for hours, but he knew his idea was correct, as his core had sprung to life. It felt as though it shone like a sun inside his body, giving off a healing warmth.

However, that warmth was quickly turning into a blistering heat as fire radiated out through it, covering every inch of his body. It felt as though he was being burned alive, and he barely was able to contain a cry of pain. It took all his effort to keep his mind steady as the fire raged through his body, and he didn't even have the energy to get up from the ground.

But finally, the core calmed down, and he opened his eyes with a shaky breath.

"How do I look?" he said with a hoarse voice.

Kenzie stood in front of him, looking worried. "Tired, but human. It looked like you died there for a bit," she said.

"Life through death," Zac muttered to himself before once again turning to his sister. "How long did the change take?"

"Not too long, around two minutes?" she answered.

Zac shook his head in disappointment. How would he use this newfound ability in battle?



## FINAL PREPARATIONS

Zac had to admit he was a bit disappointed the process to change was so arduous. He knew he already had received a top-tier opportunity that would make most of the cultivators in the Multiverse green with envy, but he still had hoped it would be quicker.

He had hoped to be able to change his class in the middle of a fight, enabling him to turn the tables. But there was just no way to do that with how the change worked. Not only did it take way too long, but he also lost almost all awareness of his surroundings when he changed, making it impossible.

Although the core was only F-grade at the moment, Zac didn't give up all hope. Every time it upgraded, some parts of its function should improve. The only problem was he had no clue how to upgrade a Specialty Core at the moment.

At least it felt nice to be back in human form again. The whole time he was in his Draugr form, he'd felt assaulted by the Cosmic Energy in the atmosphere, causing him constant discomfort. He understood why Mhal had brought a bunch of Unholy Beacons in his invasion of the island.

Zac still had a few of them, as he never got around to selling those he'd found in the undead general's Cosmos Sack as well. He was seriously contemplating creating a zone in his compound where the Cosmic Energy was transformed to Miasma instead.

He needed to figure out a method to contain the death-attuned energy first, though, and not let it get spread all over.

“The Treasure Hunt starts tomorrow. Is there anything I need to do that I’ve missed?” Zac said as he got up on his feet.

“Well, have you talked with the others?” Kenzie asked.

“Others?” Zac repeated with a bewildered look.

“There are three people from Refugees’ Harbor who are going, and Lyla is going as well,” Kenzie explained.

“Lyla’s going? Why?” Zac asked with confusion.

Everything Zac had learned about the System pointed toward the Treasure Hunt becoming a slaughterhouse. He roughly knew the strength of Kenzie’s friend, and he had to say he was unsure whether she’d survive.

“She wants to become stronger, and this is a chance for that,” Kenzie explained with worry. “You’ll look after her, right?”

“I’ll try, but I can’t promise anything. I still don’t know what’ll happen after we enter,” Zac answered.

“That’s good enough. Oh, and maybe you should talk to Emily? Her birthday is in a few weeks, and you might still be gone at that time,” Kenzie continued.

“Right,” Zac said. “Can you have the other trial takers gather at the academy in two hours?”

There was something he needed to do with Emily in any case, so he decided to head over immediately. The teenager still lived alone in his old camper up in the tree, and with a few jumps, he scaled it and landed on the large patio.

Emily had decorated it with a sofa and a couple of recliners under a parasol, with large potted plants creating some warmth. The whole thing gave off a very comfortable feeling. Zac had to admit it looked a bit better than his own austere courtyard as he knocked on the door.

After a minute, Emily opened up with a yawn. “What’s going on?” she asked with some confusion.

“Eat this,” Zac said and gave her some Springroot.

“Ugh, I’m starting to get real sick of the taste of this thing,” she muttered, but still complied.

“Sorry, just making sure. I didn’t want to give your birthday gift to a shape-shifter,” Zac said with a smile.

“Birthday gift?” she said as her mouth curved upward.

“Here,” Zac said as he took out an intricate box from his Cosmos Sack.

She immediately opened it up, and inside was a fruit giving off an extremely enticing aroma. It was the Fruit of Ascension he’d kept up until now. Ever since he found out that his sister didn’t need it, he had pondered on what to do with it.

In the end, he decided to give it to one of his closest allies rather than put it into the contribution system. The two people he’d considered were Sap Trang and Emily, but in the end, he chose Emily. He knew that Sap might be more worthy of the treasure going by his actions, but he had to think about the future of Port Atwood.

The old fisherman was a mortal just like him, but without any of the advantages that Zac had accrued. Meanwhile, Emily was shown to hold good talent for cultivation, and she still hadn’t even turned sixteen.

According to the information he’d gathered about titles for himself, there was one title that came from improving race ranking before even stepping on the path of cultivation. That meant that he could actually put Emily on track to become a true elite with the help of the fruit.

He wanted another human elite on the island, and if he could help Emily gain a bunch of titles with the help of the fruit as an initial gift, he felt it was a worthy investment. People of Earth might not care about the youths yet, as they’d missed the opportunity of the Tutorial, but Zac knew that cultivation was a marathon rather than a sprint.

Not having access to the Tutorial was a missed opportunity, but so what? The Multiverse was filled with cultivators who never went to the Tutorial but still possessed

power that the people of Earth could only dream of. Even if Emily missed that opportunity, others would come along.

“This is a Fruit of Ascension,” Zac explained. “It will help you increase your race even before turning sixteen, which will put you a step ahead of most cultivators in the world. I have seen how hard you’ve worked, and I hope this will help you become one of the pillars of Port Atwood in the future.”

Emily’s eyes reddened, and she didn’t say anything in response. Her arms only tightly cradled the small box, clutching it tightly to her chest. Zac only smiled and patted her head before walking toward the edge of the patio.

“I am leaving for the Treasure Hunt tomorrow, and I don’t know how long I will be gone. I hope you’ll have grown into a powerful warrior by the time I’ve come back. Remember, try to defeat a monster at least at level 26 as your first enemy for the titles. It will help your growth immensely,” Zac said before jumping down.

“Thank you, stay safe,” he heard before the door to the camper once again closed.

Next he walked over to the government building to speak with Abby and Adran. Abby actually chose to live inside the building itself, whereas Adran lived right next door, so both were essentially always there.

Since he was a Lord, it was within his purview to delegate certain tasks and give specific individuals more control over various functions of the town. Until now, he’d kept almost all control to himself apart from enabling others to buy teleportation arrays.

But there were clear disadvantages to this tactic. One example was that he was unable to head to Billyville, even though on paper they were allies. But that alliance never got formalized since Zac had been in the Dead Zone at the time.

After an hour-long meeting, he gave both the administrators some more control and set the course for the development of Port Atwood. Most of the islands within his

control were still unexplored, and his force was still mapping things out.

Unfortunately, they still hadn't found the main continent either, making Zac wonder just how far in the middle of nowhere they were located. But every week, new citizens got integrated into his kingdom, which in turn increased his income through taxes.

Of course, since he'd chosen a pretty generous system at the Merit Exchange, his income wasn't enormous. But if his population doubled, his income from taxes would eclipse that of his mine.

Suddenly, a knock on the door interrupted the meeting, and not long after, a secretary walked inside.

"I am sorry to bother you, but the Zhix ambassador wishes to meet Lord Atwood. They say it's urgent," she said.

"Ibtep? Send them in," Zac said with some curiosity.

It had been a while since he'd spoken with Ibtep, and he wondered what the Zhix liaison was up to. He'd actually thought the Zhix was aboard the main scouting vessel with Sap Trang, in case they encountered another Zhix hive.

Soon the Zhix entered, this time not wearing the large backpack they usually carried around.

"Greetings, Lord Atwood," the Zhix said, followed by a very formal bow.

"Long time no see, Ibtep. What's on your mind?" Zac asked.

"Nonet of Hive Kundevi wishes strength upon you for the hunt. Nonet also wanted to give you this," the Zhix said and took out a dagger and what appeared to be an amulet.

"What are these?" Zac asked curiously.

"As you've noticed, our kind are a bit enthusiastic in our greetings of new warriors," Ibtep said.

Adran only snorted in his chair, and Zac had to force himself not to roll his eyes. Enthusiastic greetings might just



be the understatement of the year. The Zhix ignored the demon's response, though, and kept going.

“These are the relics of the hive. If you show these along with sending the regards of Nonet when meeting another Anointed, they might not immediately attack. As every day passes, the Dominators grow stronger, and we believe that every race needs to work together to stop them,” Ibtep said with a serious face.

“Thank you for the gift, and give my regards to Nonet. These will be a great help,” Zac said as he accepted the two items.

The ambassador stayed for half an hour to teach Zac some basic etiquette when speaking with the Anointed, before leaving with another round of well-wishing. Since he was running out of time, Zac also ended the meeting with a final exhortation to aid Ogras in finding the shape-shifters by any means necessary.

Thirty minutes later, he sat in an emptied classroom with four others. It was two men and two women. The only one he recognized was Lyla, whereas the others were cultivators from Refugees' Harbor.

Seeing the three made Zac realize that the scale of the Treasure Hunt might be even larger than he expected before. If these people had managed to get tokens, then so would thousands of others. Lyla had gained another two levels since he saw her last, but she was still only in her mid-thirties.

As for the other three cultivators, they were around the same level, apart from a woman who was level 38. Apparently, she was one of the leaders of the cultivators from Refugees' Harbor. Zac honestly didn't feel that they would be much more than fodder at the hunt, but he wouldn't stop people from chasing their dreams.

“I called you all here to discuss the Treasure Hunt starting tomorrow,” Zac began.

The people from Refugees' Harbor hesitantly looked at each other until they focused on their leader.

“Are you confiscating our tokens?” she said with a somber expression.

Zac’s brows rose at that line of questioning. He hadn’t expected that, but after further thought, he guessed it made sense. There were quite a few people stronger than these three on the island, though they were all demons who couldn’t go.

But these people still thought that the demons were the fourth local race. Honestly, if he could bring the demons, he would probably buy the tokens from these four, as it would be far more beneficial to bring Ogras and his generals.

“No. I just called you here to tell you to be careful, and to not use my name unless it’s a last resort. I have essentially made the whole World Government an enemy, and there are false rumors surrounding me on the main continent. Mentioning that you live here might not necessarily help you, but perhaps have the opposite effect,” Zac explained with a wry smile.

“I will try to help you if we meet each other, but you shouldn’t rely on me either. I am just one person, and I believe that the Treasure Hunt will cover a huge area. In fact, if you’re not confident in staying alive on your own, you’re likely better off not going,” he continued.

However, all of them seemed adamant about going, so Zac chose to simply respect their wishes and only reiterated a few tips. He also gave them each one copy of **[Book of Babel]** so they could talk it out with whomever they encountered and a couple of healing pills each.

By now, he was done with all his matters apart from finally giving himself one last power-up. He went back to his courtyard and sat down to stabilize his mind. After a while, he took out the small vial containing the Dao Treasure, but instead of drinking it, he closed his eyes and focused on the Dao of Sharpness.

After pondering on the aspect of sharpness he wanted to evolve for an hour, he finally opened his eyes, and with one fluid motion, drank all the contents of the vial. A familiar

sensation overcame him as he saw the vast system of the Dao of Sharpness with his inner sight.

Seeing the whole Dao like this was straining his mind, and it almost felt like his soul was getting continuously cut by the sharpness. Zac didn't waste any time, instead quickly finding the part of the Dao that corresponded with his own insights, and started to absorb that part.

His understanding was quickly formalizing into a crystalized nugget of insight, and he effortlessly passed the threshold to the middle stage. Only seconds later, the simulated epiphany from the drug ran out, and he opened his eyes again to check on his harvest.

**Seed of Sharpness (Middle): Dexterity +25,  
Intelligence +5**

Zac wasn't surprised in the slightest that his upgraded seed only provided Dexterity, since the particular insight he'd gained was into that of speed. Having evolved his seed also meant that he had done everything he needed to do before the hunt.

He got up on his feet to head to his sister's place since he knew that she was skipping going to the academy today. They had already planned to have dinner together since he might be gone for a while.

But as he started to walk out of his courtyard, he saw Ogras standing there with a determined expression on his face.

“Good, you're out. We need to talk.”



## THE HUNT BEGINS

It was close to 9 a.m., and Zac stood ready in his courtyard, his sister and Ogras accompanying him.

**[Treasure Hunt commences in 5 minutes – be advised, no Cosmos Sack allowed. A temporary sack will be provided upon arrival. Failure to comply will result in forfeiture of Cosmos Sack.]**

Zac's brows rose in surprise, and he quickly took off his Cosmos Sack while the other two curiously looked at him. Even though he'd handed off most of his things to the contribution administrators, he still was using the large Cosmos Sack he'd snagged from Mhal, and it contained all sorts of things.

It seemed that the System wanted to level the playing field a bit, or at least make money a smaller part of the calculation. Perhaps it was afraid someone would bring a mountain of Nexus Crystals or even large war machines or arrays into the trial, messing things up.

It seemed that it would only allow everyone to bring the stuff that one could carry. That still didn't mean that everything would be equal. Zac quickly ran over to his bed and ripped off the linen and placed it on the floor.

Next, he took out a various assortment of things he wanted to bring, ranging from healing pills to thousands of Nexus Crystals. Essentially, he put everything cheap on the linen and tied it up into a huge knapsack that could barely hold under the

weight of its contents. He simply planned to hold it in his arms upon teleportation and hope that the System would allow it.

As for everything valuable, such as his prepared E-grade Crystals, **[Verun's Bite]**, his top-tier healing pills, and his Automatic Map, they were all placed on his person. He also placed a couple of filled water canteens and fasting pills on his person.

He still had no idea what kind of environment he would end up in and needed to be prepared for anything. The fasting pills had been given to him by Ogras yesterday. There were ten of them, and each of them would allow him to keep going without eating for a couple of days.

He used one of the demon's ranger knapsacks that snugly ran along his back to store his valuables, apart from a **[Verun's Bite]** and a couple of tomahawks that he put on his belt.

"I'm not allowed to bring a Cosmos Sack," Zac explained to his sister after he'd packed everything, afterward handing her his pouch. "Hold on to this while I'm gone."

With his preparations done, Zac sat down and just waited. When a minute remained until the hunt started, he stood up and hoisted the huge knapsack over his shoulder, holding the token in his other hand.

"Take care," Kenzie said as she looked upon her brother with some worry.

"Don't worry; I'll be fine," Zac said with a smile.

His gains in the past two weeks had been tremendous, and he couldn't help being filled with confidence. He almost felt like a fox let loose in a henhouse. He had already been at the forefront of humanity before his explosive gains as of late. With the help of his new class, titles, and Dao improvements, he was just a monster in human form.

Next he turned to Ogras, who stood close by as well, still looking a bit petulant.

"I know you're eager, but please wait until the shape-shifters are dealt with," Zac said with a shake of his head.

“Don’t worry. I’ll find that snake even if I have to turn the whole island upside down,” the demon said with annoyance. “Ruining my good things.”

Zac only snorted in response. The reason the demon had come by his courtyard yesterday was to share the fact that he had decided to enter the Mystic Realm in search of opportunities. He would pay for the stabilizing array himself as well, which would save Zac millions of Nexus Coins.

However, Zac had told the demon to wait until the shape-shifter problem was dealt with. He wasn’t sure of the cultist’s power, but he was afraid that the cultist would be able to cause a lot of damage if both he and Ogras were missing from the city at the same time.

At first, the demon had been a bit unwilling to go along with his arrangements. But after Zac promised that Ogras could finally enter the inheritance for the Umbra after Zac was back from the Treasure Hunt, provided the demon rooted out the shape-shifter first, he was quickly filled with energy again.

Actually, Zac had planned to allow the demon inside the inheritance in any case. As soon as the hunt was dealt with, he planned to go on an all-out assault against the foreign invaders, and he needed his allies as powerful as possible. But Ogras didn’t know that fact, so using the Umbra as a motivator worked pretty well.

“The two of you will act as my proxies until I’m back,” he continued. “I have given you the ability to enter alliances in case someone wants to approach us while I’m gone. Abby can buy arrays if needed.”

“Just go and get some more titles. I’ll be counting on you for the Towers later,” Ogras said.

“Stay close to Ogras until the shape-shifter problem is dealt with,” Zac said as he turned to his sister, who nodded.

The next moment, the scene in front of him was simply gone, replaced with blackness. It was reminiscent of the weird space he’d found himself in right at the moment of integration.

Hopefully, this didn't mean that there was another roll for survival, though.

This time, the System didn't speak in his mind, but a large screen soon appeared in front of him.

**[Welcome to the Limited Treasure Hunt.]**

**[Struggle for supremacy.]**

**[1. Duration of the hunt is 1 month.]**

**[2. Kill for points. Higher attribute targets reward a higher number of points. Higher level targets reward a higher number of points. Higher value targets reward a higher number of points. Rewards depend on points accumulated at the end of the hunt.]**

**Point rewards.**

**1st Place: +10 levels, 250 million Nexus Coins.**

**2nd Place: +7 levels, 150 million Nexus Coins.**

**3rd Place: +5 levels, 100 million Nexus Coins.**

**4th–10th Place: +3 levels, 50 million Nexus Coins.**

**10th – 100th Place: +1 level, 10 million Nexus Coins.**

**[3. Hunt for treasures. Rewarded Titles depend on accumulated value at the end of the hunt.]**

**[4. Temporary Ladders added for Hunters and Gatherers.]**

**[5. Talents are forged through battle. Every three days, Gatherers who have avoided battle will be teleported to an arena to fight for supremacy. Only the winner will remain.]**

**[6. Hunters can leave at any moment by crushing their token except when fighting in an arena. Wealth brought back depends on the duration of stay in the hunt. Those who leave early disqualify for any Ladder rewards.]**



Zac felt some powerlessness when he looked over the rule set. The method the System used for cranking out powerhouses was quite direct as usual. This would be a bloodbath. Not only would killing people increase one's standing on the Hunter Ladder, but it would also allow them to snatch the riches that their victims had accumulated.

The rewards for killing others were quite extravagant, and even he couldn't help being enticed. Ten levels was a huge boost, especially for him, who was so close to the limit of his class. His leveling speed had greatly slowed down lately in his human form, apart from the insane gain when he'd formed his core.

But between battling for a month and gaining the first-place reward, he'd perhaps reach level 75 in one fell swoop.

Of course, he wouldn't be the only one eyeing that reward. It was the same for everyone by now; leveling was getting exponentially harder. A boost of ten levels would help most pass a level threshold, not only giving them a bunch of additional attributes, but also a new skill.

That, together with the awarded titles, would be like giving a tiger wings. And there were men far less scrupulous than Zac who would try to kill everything in sight.

Perhaps people would focus on finding various treasures in the beginning, but soon it would turn into a crazed battle, since killing others was a far better source for treasures than arduously searching the area. Becoming a top name on the hunter's list would likely give a top spot on the gatherer list as well, doubling up on the rewards.

Besides, the System had even put a fail-safe into place to ensure people wouldn't hide from fighting. Those who only focused on finding treasures would be forced into what seemed to be a deathmatch, where they couldn't even use their token to escape.

Another interesting point to Zac was that judging by how the calculations worked, he might have just turned into a juicy target. It was clear the System wanted to incentivize battling

strong people rather than rounding up a ton of weaklings to kill.

He prayed that greed wouldn't go to people's heads and that Earth wouldn't lose too many of its powerhouses. There were strong enemies waiting at the home front after they got back.

The Zhix was the largest risk in that regard. Those people were simply crazy, and if a couple of Dominators were thrown into the mix, this thing could turn into a tragedy really quick. The Dominators were a large reason why he so desperately wanted to get stronger before the start of the hunt.

But with all his new power-ups, he had some confidence, even if he came up against the real monsters at the top of the Zhix Ladder.

Zac didn't have time to go over the rule set any longer, as the darkness was replaced with a blinding light, forcing Zac to close his eyes.

The moment he opened them again, he found himself standing in the courtyard of a dilapidated temple that emitted an aura of solemnity and vicissitude. He was happy to see that he still carried his large knapsack, and he immediately put its contents into a Cosmos Sack he found already fastened to his belt.

The space of the temporary Cosmos Sack was enormous, tens of times larger than even the one he'd looted from the Corpselord. It might mean that the area was just filled with treasure if the System thought everyone needed enough space to fit a mountain inside their Cosmos Sacks.

After he had stowed away his items, he turned toward the temple again. It was uninhabited, but it was clear that it hadn't simply been abandoned once upon a time. A huge diagonal cut had cleanly chopped off a large part of the roof and even part of the cliff the temple stood on.

Judging by the state of decay, it had likely been thousands of years since this place was assaulted, but Zac felt a terrifying sharpness emanate from the sword scar just by looking at it. It

was clear that the battle had involved some extremely powerful people to leave such a lasting effect.

The scene wasn't really something he had expected, and he quickly turned around to get a read on the situation. The sight that entered his eyes made Zac's eyebrows rise in shock.

A seemingly endless number of mountains of various sizes stretched all the way to the horizon. That wasn't the shocking thing, though, but rather that all of them were filled with various grand structures. There was everything from enormous palaces residing on the top, to hanging structures that ran all along a mountainside. Some of the mountains even seemed mostly decorative, housing statues rising hundreds of meters in the air.

There was a wide array of architectural designs and level of grandeur on the thousands of buildings that he could see, but one thing was the same for all of them. They were dilapidated or had clear signs of battle scarring.

At first, Zac thought he was looking upon the ruins of a lost civilization that had fallen to war. But remembering the depictions from the demons, he was starting to suspect he wasn't standing on a mountainous capital like the ancient Aztec cities.

It was more likely that this was a large sect that had fallen due to some sort of tribulation. However, just what sort of tribulation was slightly confusing. The scar on the temple behind him indicated an attack from a cultivator, but most of the damage seemed to come from beasts.

Zac really hoped that it was a beast horde that had attacked the sect. If cultivators were responsible for the fall of this faction, everything of value should have already been pilfered. That very fact made it seem even more likely beasts were behind the desolation, since otherwise, it would be an odd place for the System to arrange a treasure hunt.

The theory that it was a sect also made it quite easy to guess where the best valuables were. The higher status someone had, the higher up on the mountain their residence

would be placed. The peaks were reserved for the elders, sect master, and true genius disciples.

Of course, knowledge of Multiverse sects wasn't really needed to guess that fact, as the structures on the top of the mountains were clearly far more extravagant compared to the ones at the foot.

Bloody battles would likely take place at the peaks, Zac surmised with a sigh. But he didn't hurry to a peak himself, instead turning back toward the temple behind him. He took his axe from his belt and vigilantly started walking toward the entrance.

The competition would be stiff, but his goal remained simple. Reach the top of the ladder.

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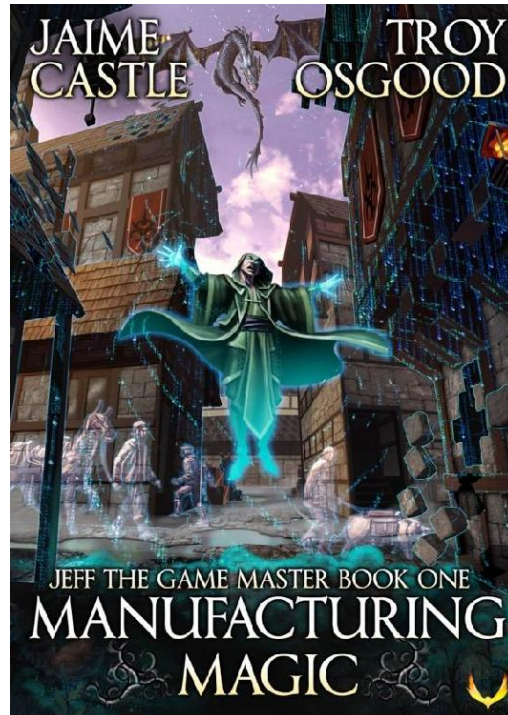
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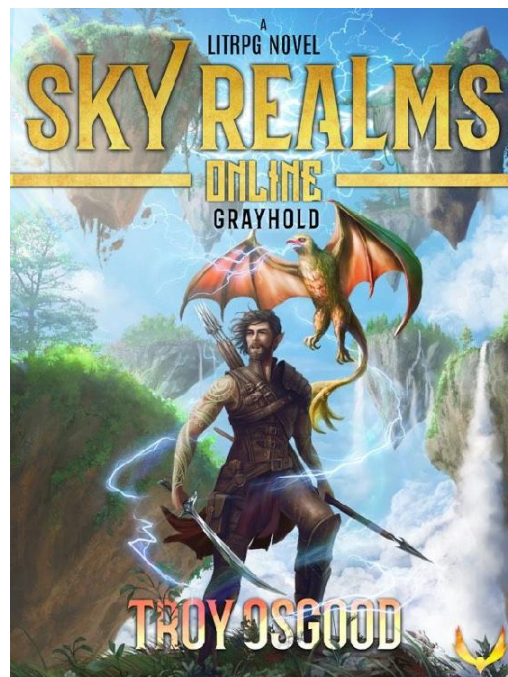
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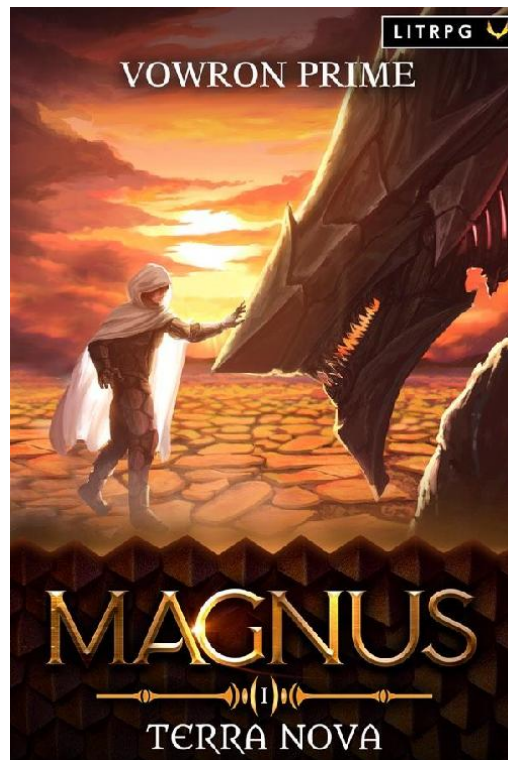
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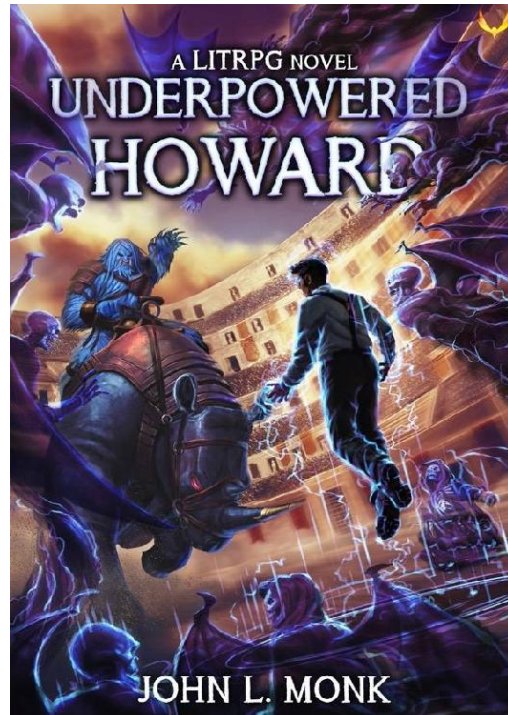
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*I was in my garage when the space elves addressed the whole world. They didn't call themselves space elves, of course. Most humans struggled to pronounce Khjurhnalva, so we opted for the easier version. They had a message for us: forces that had eradicated their species' males were now heading for Earth. Hungry for our resources, the alien hordes annihilate everything that stands in their way. The space elves offered us access to the System and asked for very little in return. After all, cooperation was vital to the survival of both our species. I, Mathew Alexander Dunphy, know all of the above is bullshit. I saw the truth with my own eyes and heard it from their beautiful, delicate, deceitful mouths. No one believes me, though. They call me mad. What reason could the space elves have to lie? Planet-wide survival reality show? Ridiculous.*

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