

The First Defier

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DEFIANCE OF THE FALL

BOOK THREE



DEFIANCE
OF THE
FALL

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DEFIANCE OF THE FALL 3
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TRAPS AND LADDERS

Zac's goal was to reach the top of the ladders of this hunt, gaining the power he needed to deal with all threats facing Earth, but he wouldn't immediately head out without getting the lay of the land. Only fools would rush up to the mountain peaks, becoming unwitting meat shields to try out whatever trials those places had in store. Going by how the System operated, it wouldn't simply leave piles of wealth for anyone to grab.

Anything worth taking would have to be conquered.

Besides, even if he might not have the highest Luck of everyone arriving here, he should at least be in the absolute top. The fact he was dropped off right in front of this specific temple might mean there were some good things inside.

There wasn't anything noteworthy to see as he walked across the small square in front of the temple, and he quickly ascended the ten steps to the real entrance. The doors were closed, but a simple push opened them with a creak, giving him a clear view of the hall inside.

The interiors were completely barren with only two exceptions as far as he could see. There was a large painting hung on the opposite side of the temple, and a simple prayer mat that appeared to be woven of reed in front of it.

Zac got curious, and after taking one last look around, entered, but the moment he put his foot inside, an enormous pressure descended upon his mind. The surroundings changed, and he suddenly found himself on a desperate battlefield.

Any way he looked, there were bloodied and muddied warriors desperately trying to kill their opponents, their eyes tinged with red in

madness and bloodlust. No one cared the slightest about their own well-being, only constantly pushing forward, furiously swinging their weapons.

Zac looked down to find an axe in his hand, and suddenly, an overwhelming battle lust overcame him. It was as though a god of war were beckoning him to massacre everything, to stand on top of a mountain of corpses. He wanted to bite into the opponent's flesh and drink their blood and revel in the madness of battle.

The next second, Zac grunted as the vision shattered, and he once again found himself in the empty temple. He actually hadn't moved, and he still only stood with one foot inside the building. But his back was soaked in sweat, and he was panting from the strain. There was even a trickle of blood running down his chin, as he'd apparently bitten his lip.

As far as Zac could tell, he had just been caught in an offensive illusion array. Luckily, between [**Mental Fortress**] and his staunch determination, he managed to quickly break himself out of it. Otherwise, he'd be a sitting duck, standing in the doorway like a fool.

He immediately regretted not having trained with Janos more. There were various ways to break out of illusions, and he had just now used the most basic one: brute force. But that would only work when his will and determination could overpower the strength of the illusion.

There were far more skilled ways to break illusions that didn't depend on strength to such a degree. It had been on his list of things to learn in the future, but there were always a million things to do, making him forget about it.

But he knew a few basic pieces of information. The most important thing was to never lose a sense of self. The moment you forgot who you were, taking on the role of whoever the illusion provided you, then you were likely screwed.

Losing the sense of self would mean that you stopped fighting the illusion, and it would take a miracle to get out in one piece. As for breaking illusions while trapped, it was actually possible. The world that was created had so-called fault lines, or weaknesses, that one could use to break out.

How to localize them and break the loop of the illusion was an art in and of itself and not something Zac could do at the moment.

But now that he knew there could be arrays, he'd be in a better position. His defensive skill was already active, but he started actively controlling it as he took another step inside. However, this time, nothing happened, and

another few steps proved that there likely only was one array as protection.

Zac looked out through the door to the vast number of buildings in the mountain ranges. Perhaps all structures had these kinds of protections put in place. If that was true, the palaces might be real death traps.

A small temple in the middle of a mountain had an array that had almost managed to suck him in. Just what kind of defenses would the grand structures where the elders lived have? Perhaps the treasure hunters themselves wouldn't be the greatest danger to this hunt, but rather the arrays.

Zac put it out of his mind and slowly walked over toward the painting, keeping his mental defenses up and running all the while. However, it truly seemed that everything was safe after defeating the array at the entrance.

He soon stood in front of the mat and the painting, trying to understand their meaning. The painting was only one large character from some unknown script. It was clear that it was derived from the normal fractals, just like those of the demons and Creators, but it was different from both of them.

The mat looked pretty cheap from first glance, but it likely was made from some high-quality material rather than normal reed. It looked pretty much brand new, even though it should have been left here for millennia. Normal reed would have rotted away long ago.

It truly looked like it was a setup to meditate upon something. Someone would sit on this mat and stare at the painting on the wall, trying to reach new insights. After making sure there were no more traps around in the area, Zac squatted down and touched the mat.

Nothing happened, making Zac sigh in relief. After hesitating for a bit, he sat down on the mat, looking up at the painting. He wanted to see what whoever once sat here saw as he or she looked upon the weird character.

Zac didn't know why, but as he stared at the exquisitely drawn painting, he almost felt drawn in, but not like with an illusion. Rather that it was trying to teach him something. Zac let himself get inundated by the feeling, trying to understand the concepts that the sigil contained.

However, a jarring sound broke Zac out of his reverie, and he turned around with annoyance. Outside the doorway, three humans stood looking around the temple. Since there wasn't really anything else inside, the trio soon turned their gazes to Zac.

The three of them didn't enter, but one of them took out a small book and quickly went through it.

"He's not on the list," Zac could hear one of them say with a subdued

voice.

Since the temple was completely empty, the words carried over to Zac on the other side. Zac's curiosity was somewhat piqued, as he'd never heard of any list. Perhaps someone had compiled a list of Rankers with descriptions by now.

He still had the information package he'd bought long ago from New Washington, detailing the top of the Ishiate Ladder. However, on that information missive, only names were given.

Someone named Starlight was in the first spot and still held a commanding lead according to the Ishiate on the island. He or she was currently level 54, even beating out Salvation, which was quite impressive.

If there was a more advanced copy of the ladder circulating, he wouldn't mind getting his hands on it. It wasn't that he was afraid to encounter some of the stronger humans, but he wanted to know what the big players looked like.

It would help him out in his side mission, creating a business monopoly with the help of Calrin. He was about to ask the trio about it, but they kept talking among themselves.

"Hidden or weakling?" another muttered with a hushed tone.

"No need to risk it. We'll stay low and observe for now," the person in the middle said.

The three nodded and made to walk out again while warily keeping their eyes on Zac. It seemed they had decided they didn't want to fight with Zac for the meager treasures inside.

Zac wasn't surprised. It was just the start of the Treasure Hunt, and only fools would enter fights blindly with complete strangers. The ladders would give an indicator of power within a week or two, but at the moment, everything was a mystery.

But Zac truly was curious about that list, so he stood up.

"Wait," he said with a calm voice.

The three hesitated for a second and turned back toward Zac.

"What?"

"What list are you talking about?" Zac asked.

"The Omniscient Eye's elite list, of course," the man said with a frown.

"Omniscient Eye?" Zac asked with confusion.

This wasn't a term he'd ever heard of before. There was an Eternal Eye high up on the ladder, and the Pavilion of Myriad Eyes, but no Omniscient Eye. But judging from the context, it seemed to be an individual or

organization that focused on intelligence gathering.

“Why play ignorant? Is this an Empire ploy?” the man in the middle said, and the others seemed to ready themselves for battle with worry in their eyes.

The confusion in Zac’s mind only increased, until he started to have a sneaking suspicion. Without another word, he flashed right in front of the trio and snatched the book still in the leftmost man’s hands.

The three seemed shocked by Zac’s speed, but they were experienced fighters, each of them immediately attacking with their swords. But Zac barely registered their actions, simply swatting the swords out of their hands with a wave.

Horror appeared in their eyes, and the leader of the three unhesitantly called for a retreat. But how could it be that easy to get away from Zac when they were in melee range?

Zac flashed after them and threw all three down on the ground. But before Zac had time to react, they had taken out their tokens, intending to crush them. Zac only had time to snatch the token out of the hands of the leader before the other two instantly winked out of existence.

“Please, my life won’t give you many points, and I haven’t collected any treasure yet. Killing me will award you nothing,” the man said with a pleading look.

“I’m not going to kill you, but I need answers,” Zac said as he used **[Inquisitive Eye]** on his captive.

[Revor – Human. Level 37 – Strength]

[Hunter 97,323]

[Gatherer 97,323]

Revor possessed neither the attributes nor the skills to block his middling scouting skill. The man in front of him should be a pretty average trial taker, roughly the same as those from his island.

But what Zac found more interesting were the additional two lines beneath his name. The System provided additional information about ladder positions. That would soon become extremely helpful in finding juicy targets or avoiding dangerous people.

The sheer number of participants was also higher than he had expected. He’d realized that the tokens weren’t quite as rare as he’d first thought after seeing the others in Port Atwood. But almost a hundred thousand participants

were quite a few.

“Ask me anything, anything.” Revor quickly nodded.

“First of all, do you possess an identification skill?” Zac asked.

“I do, but only a basic one.” He nodded.

“Use it on me and show me what it says,” Zac commanded.

He felt his bangle slightly heat up the next moment, telling him that an attempt on him was blocked. But even so, a screen appeared the next moment, looking identical to the two lines that detailed Revor’s ladder position. It was Zac’s own ladder position, which was a few spots ahead of Revor’s.

“I can’t see your name, only these two lines. I’ve never seen them before,” Revor quickly said.

Zac nodded in confirmation. It was as he’d expected. Those lines were something added by the System, and not something even a treasure from Greatest could block out. Next, he wanted to find out if his suspicions were correct.

“Open up your ladder next,” Zac said.

The man looked confused, but he complied with the request, and soon two ladders appeared in front of them. It was the Hunter and Gatherer Ladders, and Zac sighed when he saw that some already had started to accrue points on the Hunter Ladder. But that wasn’t what he was after.

But just as Zac was about to speak up, Revor interrupted him.

“I can see your placing again without using my skill!” he said with surprise.

Zac’s brows rose, and he opened up the temporary ladders as well, and it was just as Revor said. Two lines once again appeared above him.

[Hunter 97,309]

[Gatherer 97,309]

The man’s placing had gone down a bit. But since he neither had killed nor found treasure, it could only mean that people had died or fled the hunt in that short interval. But that wasn’t what Zac cared about.

Neither Zac’s bracelet nor his **[Mental Fortress]** skill activated in the slightest, but Revor was able to glean information about him even so. It meant that anyone would be able to spy on him without him noticing by simply opening the ladders.

Zac felt that it wasn't great for him, but it might help save a couple of lives. It would give the weaker people a chance to avoid the more murderous powerhouses.

"Not that ladder; the normal one for levels," Zac said, refocusing on the real issue.

"Of course!" the man quickly said, but his face only got more confused.

The next moment, a normal ladder appeared in front of him. But just as Zac had expected, he didn't recognize a single name on that list.

TREASURES

It was as Zac suspected. The man in front of him was not from Earth. The foreign names on the ladder made that painfully clear. Another very obvious point was that there was a group of clear front-runners in this other world. Seven of the top ten names seemed to be from the same family, with three of them even having evolved.

The fact that there were E-grade evolved people among the top warriors of the ladder was a bit troubling. Perhaps the Dominators weren't the only ones he needed to be wary of.

"What's the planet you came from called?" Zac asked.

"Planet? Wait... You don't mean...?" the man said, quickly catching on.

"Yes, it appears we are not from the same place. My ladder is completely different. I don't recognize anyone on yours."

"Just my luck to be captured by an off-worlder powerhouse," the man muttered in defeat.

Zac only snorted in response. He had to admit the trio was a bit unlucky, but clearly not as bad as some others, as people were already moving up the Hunter Ladder by stepping over corpses.

"Did your planet recently get integrated into the Multiverse?" Zac asked.

"Yes, around half a year ago." The man quickly nodded.

"What other races do you have on your planet apart from humans?" Zac probed.

"What?" the man said, looking truly confused.

"Didn't your world get randomized with a couple of other planets with other races?" Zac asked.

"Well, we got merged with another planet, but I don't know what other

racers you speak of,” the man said.

“Explain the forces of your planet,” Zac said.

“I am from the free states of Fyria, a part of the previous planet called Berum,” the man explained. “The planet we got fused with is called Medhin.”

“Wait, Medhin, like the ladder?” Zac asked with surprise.

“Yes. Medhin is both the name of the planet and the ruling family. From what we can tell, the whole planet was conquered by a country called Medhin thousands of years ago. The war took hundreds of years. Since then, the same family has been the regents.” The man sighed.

“Those people are lunatics. They didn’t care some God smashed our planets together, and immediately declared war on every country of Berum. They’re fanatics who have been starved for a battle for millennia, and the Medhin family are their gods.”

“So who are the other three names?” Zac said.

“They are the champions of Berum and the only ones who can keep the Medhin at bay,” the man explained with reverence in his eyes.

“So you’re in an all-out war on your home world?” Zac probed. “How do you handle that alongside the incursions?”

“Incursions? What’s that?” the man asked with confusion.

Zac blankly stared at the man for a second before he tried to clarify the situation.

“Your planet didn’t get incursions when it got integrated? Huge pillars spewing out powerful foreign invaders?”

“There’s no such thing on our planet. There is no way for such a thing to be kept quiet,” the man said with a shake of his head.

This was the first time Zac heard of planets getting integrated without getting assaulted by incursions. Perhaps launching incursions was only one of the tools in the System’s belt. Besides, it seemed the other planet was filled with enough bloodshed to create powerhouses through a world war.

Zac kept asking various things from the man, and he dutifully explained everything. He was more than eager to spill the beans on the Medhin Empire, such as their looks and estimated powers. Apparently, the Omniscient Eye was a traitor of the Medhin world, and the booklet containing the information of all the top individuals was more thorough on the Medhin side.

At the same time, the captive was more fleeting in his explanations of his own home world, apart from the fact that they weren’t very technologically advanced, and that they consisted of multiple countries that had banded

together to rebuff the Medhin Empire.

As for the Medhin family themselves, it was believed that they had been low-level cultivators before their integration even started. It was this power that had made the family stand out, and allowed them to paint themselves as gods.

They had also made their whole empire search for precious treasures to further their advancements, keeping all the best things for themselves. According to Revor, all of them were not only high leveled, but also extremely strong for their levels.

Especially the emperor himself, Nenothep Medhin, was a true monster. He'd decimated an entire army of elite cultivators by himself, leaving unscathed afterward. Luckily, the free states had managed to get their hands on some War Arrays, allowing them to keep the Medhin at bay.

But it looked bleak for them, and they were desperately hoping that this hunt would provide them with the means to turn the situation around. Zac felt bad for the people, but it honestly wasn't his business. He wasn't sure he'd ever meet these off-worlders again.

"A final request. Walk inside the temple," Zac said.

The man looked confused, but he complied. However, after taking a first step inside, he stopped. In just seconds, he was shaking, sweat running down his back. He was stuck in the array. Zac observed for a bit longer until he grabbed the man and pulled him back out.

Revor's eyes were red-rimmed, and he breathed heavily, but he was freed from the illusion when Zac moved him.

"What just happened?" he panted.

"Illusion arrays. I suspect most places are protected by them," Zac explained.

For now, that was all the information Zac needed. The Medhin seemed strong, but he was confident in himself. His weak point was that he wasn't a cultivator, so he couldn't boost the power of his attacks with a cultivation method. However, he more than made up for it in the sheer amount of attributes.

It was also nice to see that the arrays hadn't been broken as soon as he walked inside. Everyone would have to pass the trial to enter the premises of the various palaces. Since the man had answered everything he needed to know, Zac simply decided to hand back the token to him. Zac felt no need to get a few paltry points from the man by killing him.

“Can I ask you? From your world, are there people who are able to kill the Medhin royals?” Revor suddenly asked as he held the token in his hands.

“Yes, a few,” Zac said after some hesitation. “Wait, are you leaving?”

“Our meeting was a wake-up call. I am not strong enough to play in these muddied waters. This time, I survived, but I fear the next person I meet will not be so benevolent. Good luck. I hope you kill a few of the royals,” the man said with hope on his face before he disappeared.

Zac quietly looked at the empty spot where Revor just stood. He felt that the man made a sensible choice. People like him would have a high chance of becoming fodder unless they hid in places where the powerhouses didn't deign to go. Most would likely kill people like him, even if the points awarded weren't great.

Zac himself was still a bit unsure how he would go about gaining a placement on the Hunter Ladder. He was reluctant to go on a killing spree just to increase his points.

But Zac soon decided upon a path. For anyone he encountered, he'd demand their treasures. This was a treasure hunt, after all, and it was the Gatherer Ladder that provided the most important rewards, the titles. He needed to be a bit ruthless, and while he wasn't okay with wanton murder, he could live with some highway robbery.

If people complied, they would go their own way afterward and find new treasure for themselves. If they tried to attack him, Zac wouldn't show mercy.

For the point ladder, he would simply hunt the hunters. Anyone high on the hunter list should both be strong enough to provide a good amount of points while also being a murderous lunatic. Hunting these people would have multiple positive effects.

First, it would cut away the competition for the rewards. If he killed everyone above him on the ladder, he would be the winner. Secondly, it would save a lot of innocent people's lives to remove those kinds of people from the equation.

Finally, it was the best way to get more treasure. The top hunters should all be teeming with wealth after a week or two.

After having decided on his path, he walked back into the temple. This time, he wasn't assaulted by any array as he passed through the entrance, which indicated that the arrays had likely been modified somehow by the System. As long as he passed it once, the array wouldn't attack him again.

He walked over to the mat and grabbed it to put it into his Cosmos Sack,

but gave a start when he looked beneath it. To his surprise, there was a golden crystal hidden in a groove beneath the ratty mat, fitted perfectly inside.

He quickly picked it up and infused it with some energy. A screen appeared, looking like a book cover with an intricate design. The crystal wasn't a skill crystal, but rather a compendium of knowledge.

As for the subject, it was declared in the title. Luckily for Zac, the crystal worked the same way as the information missives from the pavilion, having automatic translation features.

[Eastern Trigram Sect – Formation Ledger, Beginner Compendium]

As Zac looked through the compendium, he was getting more and more astounded. This was what was considered a beginner compendium? The crystal held almost an endless amount of information, from very simple concepts to very esoteric knowledge.

Learning everything inside the crystal would likely give anyone an extremely robust foundation if one wanted to become a formation master, either as a main class or as a side profession.

It might not be something Zac had the time to properly peruse at the moment, but it would be a great addition to his town. The knowledge of formations was essentially nil among his people, and if he could nurture a proper formation master, he would save a fortune.

Not only would the formation master be able to create new formations, saving Zac the cost of buying them, but any formation actively managed by a formation master would see a great increase in power and efficiency.

Zac quickly put the crystal inside his pouch and opened up the Gatherer Ladder. As Zac expected, he'd jumped from the bottom all the way up to spot 180. The crystal was obviously a great treasure. But it also proved that others weren't just sitting around.

Such a great find didn't even place him in the top hundred. He stowed away the prayer mat next and noted with some surprise he rose another forty-eight spots from that addition. Finally, he detached the large painting from the wall and rolled it up.

The painting itself wasn't considered very valuable by the System, only increasing his ranking by one. But he still kept it, as he was curious about that odd feeling earlier before he was interrupted. Going by the hidden crystal, the painting might help to give insights into array formations. Finally, he wanted to take away the protective illusion array as well, but no matter how he

looked, he couldn't find any array flags.

He even ripped off a couple of the wooden planks on the floor to look beneath the temple, but there was simply nothing there. His best guess was that the array was somehow engraved in the structure itself rather than being controlled by array flags. Unless it was the System who put it in place for the hunt.

Since he was done with the temple, he headed outside, pondering on his next move. First, he took out his Automatic Map, but to his disappointment, it only showed the various mountains. He had hoped that it would name the various palaces to guide him toward the more suitable targets, but maybe the map was too low grade.

Since his current mountain was as good as any, he started running up toward the peak. A month was a long time, but the area was just enormous. Even if he only slept an hour a day, he would only be able to check out part of the area. There was no time to waste.

As he ran, he briefly considered whether he should change his face to stay under the radar, but he ultimately decided against it. He felt no need to keep a low profile any longer. If someone had a problem with him, he'd deal with it one way or another. Besides, with everyone being able to see the ladder placements of others, there was no point in trying to hide.

That was just how Zac liked it, though. He was tired of hiding in the shadows, fearful that his actions would implicate those around him. Now, he could finally go all out.

APPEASING THE SPIRIT

A sudden rustle in the bushes made Zac look over as he ran up the mountain, only to see a black shape rapidly closing in on him. Zac punched out, relying on well-honed instincts, and a pained yelp escaped from the beast that tried to ambush him.

The next moment, the edge of an axe fell down, cutting the animal's head clean off. Zac stopped to look down at the thing he just killed. He had to say it looked quite a bit like a rat, but one as big as a horse. Its legs were also slightly longer, while its tail was a short stub. Finally, its black fur was so thick and stiff that it almost looked like quills rather than hair.

Everything had happened so quickly that Zac didn't have time to use his investigative skill on it, but if it truly was a rat, there would likely be a lot more of them. Judging by the amount of Cosmic Energy he received, it wasn't very strong, perhaps somewhere around level 40. Most trial takers shouldn't have much trouble with this thing.

Next, Zac opened up the ladders once again as he walked toward the animal. He threw the carcass of the rat-beast inside his pouch but soon dumped the body by the side of the path once again. He wanted to test out whether there was any value in the carcass, but since he didn't move a single spot from it, he deemed it mostly worthless.

Judging from the mangy fur and nasty smell, the meat wouldn't be serviceable either, and Zac would rather just eat the boring fasting pills than this thing. But he was still quite happy with the results.

While killing the beast hadn't helped his Gatherer rank, it did help with his Hunter rank since it jumped up a couple of thousand spots. That meant that killing other trial takers wasn't the only method to try for the top rewards

on the point ladder, which was great news for Zac.

Because if there was one thing he was good at, it was the wholesale slaughter of beasts.

Zac kept going up along the mountain paths, keeping an eye out for other trial takers or beasts. As he ascended the mountain, he noticed that the Cosmic Energy was gradually improving the further up he got.

It wasn't surprising that the elite would build their residences at the spots with the most energy, but he wondered why the mountain worked like this. His own mountain was different since the valley was the place with the most concentrated energy there. Perhaps massive arrays were placed inside the mountains to redirect the energies toward the top.

Disappointingly enough, he only encountered three more beasts, which were simply called Mountain Rats according to his skill, in thirty minutes of travel. It made him wonder if his plan of gaining points from animals was a no-go. There simply were too few of them to have any significant impact on the ladder.

He also started to suspect that something was odd about this mountain. Most of the mountains he could see from looking around were filled with structures and caves, but he was almost at the top, and he hadn't seen a single building since the small temple.

He hoped it was because the past owner of the mountain was a real big shot who could keep most of the mountain for himself, rather than it being a trash mountain no one had bothered with for some reason.

Finally, he found himself at the crest of the mountain and had to take a moment to look at the scene with awe. It was completely flat like someone had cleanly cut the whole tip off in a mighty swing of a sword. He could see it was the same with many of the other peaks, but it still was extremely impressive up this close.

Most of the summit was empty and only occupied by a large, beautiful square, and Zac couldn't help but feel some wonder as he stepped onto the enormous tiles. Each of the tiles was over three meters across and gave off a shimmering luster. It looked as though they were made from pristine marble, but golden veins ran across their surface.

More importantly, it felt as though they somehow cleansed the area with a soothing aura. Zac suddenly got an idea and pressed down his axe between two tiles. With a twist, he managed to lift it up, and to his surprise, the tile weighed almost as much as a car. He immediately threw the flooring into his

pouch.

His ranking didn't change from the tile, but he didn't care about that. He had found a great material to renovate the surroundings of his Dao Repository.

Since they were going to undergo the inheritance trials pretty soon, he really needed to appease the Tool Spirit. He couldn't risk Brazla throwing a wrench in his and Ogras' plans because he wasn't happy about his view. This flooring would be perfect to surround the repository with, and they weren't very hard to yank out of the ground.

Zac set about dismantling the entire square, gaining speed with every tile ripped loose. In just thirty minutes, half of the flooring was dismantled, and he was closing in on the core of the summit.

In the center of the square, a small-sized palace was placed. He still hadn't gotten close to it, as he was saving it for later. Instead, he methodically slammed his axe into the ground once again and put away the tile after yanking it loose.

The tiles were starting to have an effect, as he'd gained two spots from harvesting them. That might not sound like much, but he'd spent half an hour on them, and many others should have found treasures themselves during that time.

That he not only kept his spot but even advanced proved that these tiles were more than just beautiful. Unfortunately, he wasn't able to detile the whole summit before voices reached his ears. Not long after, a group of ten walked up together, warily looking around.

Zac frowned when he saw them, and he immediately opened up the ladders. The group was at the bottom of the barrel when it came to treasure, but two of them were higher on the hunter list than he was, meaning they'd likely killed a few people on the way up here.

All of them wore the same type of clothes, and it was pretty clear they were from some army. However, since the design of the clothes was foreign to him, these people were likely from the other planet.

"Enemy ahead," a lanky man said as soon as he spotted Zac, who was in the middle of retrieving another tile.

"What the hell? He's stealing the floor?" one of the men immediately burst out, eliciting guffaws from a few of the soldiers.

"Check his ladder! Those tiles must be worth a fortune!" another man suddenly shouted, and the others quickly turned deadly serious as they looked

upon him.

A burly man, who appeared to be their leader judging by his slightly more elaborate getup, took a step toward Zac.

“Hand over your Cosmos Sack, and we’ll let you leave with your life,” he curtly said.

Zac’s brows rose a bit. It appeared these people felt there was safety in numbers, especially when his hunter ranking was so low.

“I’ll say the same to you. Leave your sacks and piss off this mountain,” Zac retorted as he stashed another tile.

“Fourth formation,” the leader grunted, and the squad was clearly ready for that command.

All of them immediately started to radiate a respectable amount of power, which was all focused on the leader, who had taken out two swords. Zac looked on with interest because if he wasn’t wrong, they were utilizing a War Array. The only other explanation was that all of the others were somehow support classes.

The veins of the leader started to bulge, and the air around him vibrated from the huge infusion of power. Clearly his strength had gone up a couple of tiers from the infusion. The others stood rooted in place, not making any moves against Zac.

Two-thirds of the people seemed to be continuously infusing their leader with power, whereas the last third erected a dense shield around everyone besides the leader. Zac had to admit that it was a pretty good setup. The largest problem with wars was the huge disparity in power between people, where one powerhouse could decimate thousands of warriors.

But the other planet had already found the solution to this. They made their strongest person far stronger, and Zac would have to guess that the effect was far better than his own Hatchetman’s Rage.

He briefly wondered just how powerful he would become if he got a squad of demon soldiers to empower him in the same way. It would be quite the scene. But Zac didn’t have time to dream any longer, as the leader was upon him with surprising speed, his two swords already aiming to cut him in two.

The soldier didn’t want to waste any time, it appeared, and the skill he used contained an extreme amount of force. Both swords shone with a sinister light, but Zac couldn’t figure out just what type of element it contained.

At first, he was about to clash with the attack with his axe, but at the last moment changed his mind and scrambled out of the way. It wasn't due to fear he'd lose the exchange, but rather fear that the shockwave might damage the tiles around him.

The swords were already following him, aiming to stab him in his back, but he flashed away with **[Loamwalker]**, arriving in front of the turtling soldiers. He slammed down his axe with a little bit of power to test its strength and was impressed with how sturdy it was.

He wasn't interested in entertaining these people any longer, though, and the next strike contained both his Dao of Heaviness and his full force. The shield immediately cracked, which clearly hurt the defenders, and they staggered and even coughed out some blood.

The next moment, all of them were dead, as a lightning-quick **[Chop]** killed them before they had the time to take out their talismans or erect new defenses. He was surprised to see that the sacks on the bodies automatically turned into streams of light that went into his pouch. However, he didn't have time to check it out, as there was one more of them.

Zac turned around to see the leader desperately crush his token, but Zac flashed in front of him and, with a Sharpness-empowered strike, cleanly killed him as well.

It was a bit odd. The first two Zac had seen escape with the tokens immediately disappeared, whereas Revor and this leader took a moment before they were whisked away.

The System wasn't very benevolent, and it thrived on conflict. Zac already felt it noteworthy that it allowed escape at all. That it would add some hidden caveats felt natural, and Zac was starting to believe that it might have to do with either the ladders or wealth.

The higher one was on the ladder, the longer it would take to escape. That way, the weaklings might be able to escape, but the stronger people would be stuck in life-and-death battles to a higher degree. Perhaps it would take himself minutes to disappear due to his attributes or accumulated wealth, making it useless in battle.

He was also curious to see how the System dealt with kills that happened during the seconds after the tokens were crushed but they still hadn't disappeared. Soon he got the answer. The decapitated corpse disappeared, but the Cosmos Sack went into his own pouch instead.

After some hesitation, he threw the bodies into his pouch as well before

resuming his detiling. In another fifteen minutes, the square was picked clean, and he instead focused his attention on the palace in the center of the summit.

He stopped some ways from the entrance and took out one of the bodies from before and unceremoniously chucked it over the decorative wall toward the inner area of the courtyard. However, nothing happened as the corpse thumped down on the ground.

Zac still activated his **[Mental Fortress]** to the max, and after some deliberation, he added **[Nature's Barrier]** as well. All arrays weren't necessarily mental attacks. The crystal he found contained all sorts of arrays, including pure murder formations that summoned all kinds of horrifying attacks.

He warily stepped toward the vaulted gates, his eyes darting back and forth, looking for any signs of danger.

RANSACKING

Just as he took his first step inside the building, his danger sense sparked to life. To Zac's surprise, it actually came from behind rather than from something inside the palace. He stood completely frozen, and a second later, a dagger appeared out of nowhere.

It headed straight toward his neck through a brief crack in the defensive wall of the whirling leaves around him. But he was already ready for the attack and quickly moved his head out of the way and simultaneously grabbed the hand holding the weapon.

The next moment, he held the rogue who tried to sneak attack him by his neck, and it was actually an Ishiate. Zac frowned a bit over what to do with the beastman draped in black. He was on a good footing with both camps of the beastmen, but that didn't mean that he was going to allow people who tried to kill him to roam free.

The Ishiate was trying to say something, but Zac ignored him as he walked inward, holding his captive as a shield. So far, there had been no arrays activating, but he didn't believe that a summit palace would have no protections at all.

He passed the inner courtyard, which seemed to have once been a garden but now was only covered in windswept weeds and twisted trees. As he walked, the Ishiate tried to wrest himself free with desperate effort, but a slap on the back of his head rendered him unconscious.

Soon Zac stood in front of the main doors into the proper structure, and he used the unconscious beastman to push the door open. It was a bit callous to use him as a human shield, but the man did try to kill him, after all.

Nothing happened as the huge door swung open, but he saw there was a

mostly translucent shimmer in the air inside. Something was fishy about it, so Zac splashed some water in the face of the assassin until he woke up, and then unceremoniously threw him inside.

The Ishiate quickly regained his senses and gracefully twisted in the air to land with his feet down. But the moment he touched the ground, it was as though the air itself combusted, causing an inferno to erupt around him.

The assassin screamed and tried to run out again, likely forgetting about the token in his muddled state. Zac waited at the door and struck him dead the moment he came within reach. Next, Zac took out one of the soldier corpses and threw it inside as well since he still saw that odd shimmer in the air.

This time, nothing happened, and the corpse lay in the hall unassailed. Perhaps the arrays were smart enough not to expend their energy on people who were already dead, meaning collecting bodies to test the waters might be useless.

Judging by the half-burned state of the assassin, it was a purely offensive array that protected the entrance. Zac was even less worried about those than the mental arrays, though, and he staunchly stepped inside while infusing some of his Dao of Trees into the leaves whirling around him.

A large reason he once chose [**Nature's Barrier**] before heading to the Dead Zone was that it gained power based on his Endurance, which meant that the skill had received a huge upgrade in the past weeks. The leaves were far sturdier compared to before, and Zac believed not even the dangerous sniper rifles would be able to get through them any longer.

Just like when the Ishiate had been thrown inside, an inferno erupted around him the moment he took his first step inside, but the leaves staved off most of the flames before they could reach him. Some of it still snuck past, though, but between his flameproof robes and his high Endurance, it only stung a bit.

Zac kept walking through the flames for a few seconds. He didn't dare to run since his visibility was practically zero, and there might be more arrays superimposed on the first one. But soon the flames winked out of existence, leaving Zac slightly toasty but otherwise fine.

He found himself in a large hall, but unfortunately, there were no piles of wealth lying around. In fact, the whole place felt very austere, with only a couple of paintings similar to the one from the temple adorning the walls. A central staircase stood right in front of him, lined with crystals that gave off a

soft glow.

Zac pondered whether to walk up the stairs or head down to some subterranean basement but quickly chose to walk to a higher floor. If this were a medieval castle, there might be a treasury on the bottom floor, but with arrays and Cosmos Sacks, it felt more likely the best treasures would be in the owner's quarters.

After trying a few doors upstairs, he found the one that should lead to the private area of the owner of the mansion, but the moment he walked through, it felt like he was slammed in the head with a hammer. He only saw white until he finally came to again, and after taking a glance at his watch, he was shocked to see that he'd been out of it for over ten minutes.

He had been hit with something like a mental concussion attack, and he was lucky he was alone inside the palace. It was a great lesson for him: no place was safe. He once again entered the room, and this time, he wasn't attacked.

The room was quite sparse, housing only a desk and some decorative paintings and crystals. He sensed that the crystals in the walls were probably Divine Crystals, but unfortunately, the arrays that kept this place going had exhausted pretty much all the energy inside them, making them worthless.

He walked over to the chest and found there was a token and a sack on it. The token looked a lot like the depiction of the placements of some array, and it was the same as the design he'd seen on the front of the Array Crystal he'd looted earlier.

Zac suspected it was the logo for the Eastern Trigram Sect, and that the sect actually focused on arrays. Either that or this specific mountain housed people who focused on arrays. He picked up the token and imbued some energy into it and found it was an identification token for an elder.

After a brief hesitation, he fastened it to his belt. Perhaps some of the automatic defensive features in the mountains wouldn't harass him if he had this token. Next, he eagerly grabbed the Cosmos Sack, but it also turned into a stream of light and entered his temporary pouch.

He touched his sack to check out the contents. Most of the space was currently occupied by the huge tiles, and they were neatly ordered in a corner. There were also assortments of low-grade weapons with some basic equipment like tents and bandages, and Zac guessed those were the things from the sacks he had stolen so far.

There was also another corner that was filled with a respectable pile of

Nexus Crystals and a few crystals. They actually looked like skill crystals, and he took one out. But as soon as he tried to glance at its contents, he was blocked.

It was as though the information was protected by a password, or rather, a riddle. He received a stream of information that essentially told him that he needed to gain a certain understanding of arrays in order to get past the protection. It was something like the trials that they would have Brazla perform to gain access to the repository skills in the future.

There were also a couple of normal notepads and vials with pills inside. Finally, there was a densely inscribed metal ball, and Zac curiously took it out. The moment he held it in his hand, he let out a surprised grunt because he was barely able to hold on to it. It was extremely heavy, making it feel like he was carrying one of those stones for strongman competitions. That was saying something with his monstrous attributes, and Zac figured it must be made from some Spiritual-grade metals.

He had no idea what it was, and it provided no information for it either. After looking it over, he put it back. For all he knew, it could be a bomb, and he didn't want to carry it in his arms. Zac looked through all the drawers in the desk afterward but found nothing interesting besides a large feather that might have been used as a pen before.

There was also a door that led to an inner room, and after stripping the paintings from the wall, he walked inside. It was a meditation chamber with a beautiful panoramic view of the surrounding mountains. There was also a similar mat as the one he had already taken, and he quickly snatched that one as well. Unfortunately, there were no hidden treasures beneath it as with the other one.

He was about to head back, but some change in the periphery of his vision made him curiously look over. Something was happening on another mountain. A huge fire had flashed into being in an instant, spreading over a hundred meters. Zac could even hear the explosion two mountains over.

It looked like someone with pretty decent power was flexing his or her muscles. As Zac was studying the mountains more closely, he actually saw a little bit of movement here and there. Things were really kicking into motion, filling Zac with some eagerness to move on to the next place.

Zac scoured the palace for anything else of value, but he couldn't find it. He did find some exquisite furniture in a dining room, though, and unceremoniously threw everything inside the pouch. There was no need to be

discerning with the gargantuan space inside, and anything that caught his eye went into the sack.

Since he was done, he exited the same way he came, but to his surprise, two people stood outside, carefully looking at the entrance. However, when they saw Zac emerging, their brows rose, and they quickly used some sort of escape skill without hesitation, making Zac unable to guess where they went.

Zac tried to figure out their tracks for a bit, but that wasn't his strong suit. Instead, he headed down the mountain in the opposite direction from the one he came from. If that duo wanted to, they were welcome to follow so that he could loot their pouches as well.

The direction Zac walked was partly chosen due to not wanting to double back, but also that one of the mountains in this direction had caught his eye earlier. It was extremely steep, with a modest mansion on top. The thing that drew his attention, though, was the hidden hanging fields that seemed to be cut inside the mountain itself and apparently were only accessible from the palace above.

He couldn't really tell from the distance, but it truly looked like fields made for growing Spiritual Herbs. Perhaps the fields were holding untold treasures since Spiritual Herbs generally grew stronger the higher their age was. Herbs that had absorbed Cosmic Energy for thousands of years would each be worth a fortune, and he couldn't stop a creepy smile from appearing on his face as he thought about looting a whole field of them.

That very smile seemed to have an astounding effect since he ran into a young girl who was furtively climbing toward the peak he just left. The moment she saw Zac with his grin, she flinched in fright and she hurried to crush the token in her hands.

Zac didn't even have time to react before the girl winked out of existence. Her sudden disappearance made Zac more certain about his hypothesis that the delay was dependent on power or wealth, as the girl seemed to be a real weakling, to the point she actually walked with her token in hand.

As he descended the mountain, there wasn't really anything really worth noting. There was another temple at the midway point, but it was reduced to only rubble. Zac briefly tried to look through the ruins for some more treasure, but the hanging gardens were beckoning him, and he quickly gave up the idea of a proper excavation.

Finally, after a mad dash, he found himself at the foot of the mountain, and to his delight, it was teeming with beasts. He saw tens of the black rats

frenziedly ripping apart the carcass of a large bear, and the next moment, he was attacked by a pack of wolves.

It was as though the crevices between the mountains were made out of natural barriers of beasts. Unless one had decent power or a larger group, it would be suicide to try to change mountains to explore. Seeing this many targets for grinding his ladder position, he wanted to just go on a rampage, but he stopped himself.

Getting a high position on the Hunter Ladder this early wasn't necessarily a good thing. People would run for the hills if they spotted him, making it harder for him to liberate people from their Cosmos Sacks. Instead, his eyes turned up toward the gardens, which were no longer visible from this vantage.

Zac had his axe in his hand and greed in his eyes, so a corridor of carnage was quickly carved toward the neighboring mountain.

ALCHEMIST'S MOUNTAIN

Zac was almost at the crest of the mountain housing the Alchemist Palace, as he'd named the mansion due to what he hoped to find inside.

He'd entered a couple of buildings on the way up, but he hadn't found much of value apart from a few minor pills and crystals. After having visited a couple of buildings, it was pretty clear there was a correlation between the power of the defenses and how high up on a mountain it was located.

He could essentially burst through the ones close to the foot of the mountain without even activating his defenses. But these domiciles were either for servants or low disciples, and it wasn't really worth the time for Zac to enter. But from somewhere at the middle, he needed to activate at least **[Mental Fortress]** to avoid any mishaps.

As for the pure physical traps, he could pretty much tank them with his body, though it hurt more the higher up he went. Endurance was already his highest attribute by now, and it clearly showed as he shrugged off everything from bolts to fireballs as he crashed through the buildings.

He also robbed a trio of cultivators from the other world, who went down the mountain with disappointment afterward. Interestingly enough, new sacks spawned on their belts just a few seconds after they were robbed of their original ones.

However, after seeing that he only caught some basic necessities and nothing of value, he decided to reevaluate his tactics. At least, for now, he'd check the ladders before robbing people. It was true that many a little makes a mickle, but there was no point to stealing a bunch of tents and sleeping bags.

The mountain he was currently scaling was far more cultivated compared

to the last one, and Zac was currently running up along one of the multiple sets of stairs that all seemed to be leading to the top. He also hadn't encountered a single animal since passing the halfway point, likely because there was no vegetation from that point.

At first, he was a bit worried about the lack of fauna, but then he remembered how it looked around his Tree of Ascension. Due to its high energy requirements, it killed and absorbed all life in the vicinity. Perhaps the hanging gardens were doing the same and had long ago killed off all other life on the mountain.

Zac was filled with excitement as he closed in on the crest, but a huge shockwave from above stopped him in his tracks. Someone was fighting up above, and the power they displayed wasn't a joke.

He frowned and slowly walked up, careful not to make any loud sounds. The Cosmic Energy in the air surged as he walked up the last sets of stairs, and not long after, a rumble shook the whole mountain.

Zac's axe was already in his hands as he looked over the edge, and the sight made Zac frown. Over a hundred people were actually on the mountain, almost all of them decked in the familiar attire of the Medhin Empire. Most were sitting down as if in meditation, and the only exceptions were three people.

One of them was a young man with an arrogant demeanor who was decked in a golden robe. He stood unblemished in front of the sitting army, and it was clear they were using a War Array to empower him, as he glowed with power. It also looked like he had a large blue circle tattooed on his forehead.

The other two weren't as well off. One of them might be dead, lying motionless on the ground in a pool of his own blood. Above him stood a woman who was bleeding quite heavily as well, but clearly wasn't ready to give up yet.

What was more surprising was that Zac actually recognized the two. It was Thea Marshall and the shield-bearing bodyguard who had accompanied her and Henry Marshall to the auction a month ago. When he realized who the two were, his eyes couldn't help once again turning to the young man, who seemed to have defeated them without much of a problem.

For a second, he pondered whether he should retreat, but after a bit, he took the final steps up the stairs with a sigh. He couldn't let the third Ranker and one of the main combatants against the incursions die here. It might

cause the whole Marshall Clan to collapse, and they were the only other main force he could partner with at the moment, what with the tense situation with the New World Government.

The young man threw a glance at Zac when he appeared, but he clearly discounted him as a non-threat. Instead, he summoned what appeared to be a tornado of wild energies in his hand and pointed it toward Thea. It flashed in a few colors and reminded Zac of the horn of the Star Ox. However, this jumble of energies seemed to have mainly light blue and brown energies, compared to the rainbow of the beast horn.

Thea's eyes thinned, and she grabbed the body of the bodyguard and made to retreat, but a huge fractal appeared above her, somehow rooting her in place. Zac couldn't sense anything apart from the chaotic swirl from the man and guessed that it was something created by the army.

"You can't just leave after your words, woman," the man said with a sneer. "The punishment for rejecting the divine invitation is death."

The next moment, he pushed the chaotic jumble of energies forward, and it trembled with power as it closed in on her. Zac saw no option, so he used **[Loamwalker]** to flash in front of her, and covered the trio with his defensive skill as he launched a Dao-Infused **[Chop]** at the incoming attack.

The two strikes clashed with a tremendous explosion, and Zac was barely able to keep himself from getting pushed off the mountain as he was blanketed by the wild energies that ripped through his leaves. Thea and the bodyguard were better off, as Zac soaked up most of the damage, and she confusedly looked up at his broad back.

Thea's eyes widened in shock when she saw who it was, but they quickly refocused on their enemy.

"Why are you here? You need to leave. Those soldiers are empowering that man to crazy levels," she frantically whispered, blood running down her mouth.

"I know," Zac said with a shrug as he turned back toward the man, who finally had turned his eyes toward him.

"Who are you? The punishment for interfering in my divine judgment is death," he angrily said as he charged up another chaotic jumble in his hands.

Zac only snorted in response as he tried to use **[Inquisitive Eye]** on his enemy. Unfortunately, it failed, apart from showing the man's standing on the ladder. And this person was actually on the fourteenth spot on the Hunter Ladder. This man was clearly a rabid animal from his ranking and attitude.

Anyone that high up must have started killing people from the get-go rather than hunting for treasures.

Now that Zac had the time to properly look at the attack, he felt somewhat certain it was a mix of two Daos, mainly something related to wind and something earth-related, which explained the colors. Perhaps the mixing of Daos representing gaseous and solid matter was making the resulting attack extremely unstable, turning it into a bomb.

“I’m guessing you’re one of the Medhin?” Zac said as he cracked his neck. “Leave your Cosmos Sack and crush your token, and I’ll allow you to leave.”

The young man blankly stared for a few seconds until he started to wildly laugh. Meanwhile, the soldiers behind him started to radiate an unrestrained killing intent that could almost match Zac’s own. These people truly seemed to be fanatics, judging by how angry they became from Zac’s comment.

“Allow me to leave? My will is the divine will. Only the Great Lord can tell me what to do,” he said, infusing his skill with far more power.

However, by now, Zac had managed to infuse all the Cosmic Energy he needed into his forearm, and the space above the young man shattered.

“Shield!” one of the captains immediately roared, and a thick golden glow enveloped the young man before the wooden hand even had time to emerge halfway.

But the young royal wasn’t the target of the hand as it emerged with lightning speed and slammed down right in the middle of the sitting army. They had a sturdy shield as well, but it wasn’t enough to block **[Nature’s Punishment]** infused with the Dao of Heaviness.

A tremendous sound echoed out from the mountain, and it almost seemed the gargantuan hand would crack the summit in two. Over two-thirds of the soldiers were turned into meat paste from the attack, and most of the others were wounded or dying from the shockwave.

“You!” the young man roared in anger, but before he had time to react, Zac was upon him with determination in his eyes.

“Lord Tyrbat!” one of the soldiers shouted and once again tried to start up the infusion of power.

But suddenly, his throat was cut right open, and he started to bleed out with widened eyes. The same scene happened amongst most of the living soldiers, and they fell one by one.

Meanwhile, Zac swung his axe down, imbued with the Dao of Sharpness,

the edge aiming straight for the young man's head. Madness was evident in Tyrbat's eyes, and he redirected the attack he'd charged up to intercept Zac's strike.

Zac's swing was like a flash of lightning, cutting straight through the attack, releasing torrential energies all over him. Zac activated a defensive charge from his robe at the last second, and the axe kept going straight down. But Tyrbat had excellent reflexes and nimbly dodged, displaying great speed even without the help of the War Array.

Zac didn't want to relent, though, and immediately followed up with another strike. Unfortunately, one of the rings on the man's hands lit up, and a shield activated that actually managed to block Zac's strike. Meanwhile, Tyrbat took out a radiant sphere from his Cosmos Sack.

The ball's glow quickly increased in intensity, reminding Zac of the Lightning Punishment Arrays he still had in his possession. Zac didn't want to let his enemy let this thing go off, and desperately tried to swing at the man. But once again, a second ring on his hand lit up, creating another impenetrable shield. Meanwhile, a brown shimmer covered the whole body of the Medhin royal.

The next moment, the ball exploded, and Zac pushed backward to avoid the blast zone, but his face still got singed by the heat. The next moment, another much louder explosion erupted behind him, and he turned around to see that the royal had appeared right between Thea and her downed bodyguard, wildly laughing.

Something had detonated the moment he arrived, as he stood in the middle of a crater, but he himself was unhurt. The brown shimmer around him was likely another defensive measure to protect himself while he let the bomb explode right in his hands. It was an extremely effective tactic, as the other two were far worse off than Zac. If the bodyguard wasn't dead before, he surely was now, as half of his body had been blasted into nothingness.

Thea was still alive, though she barely managed to stay conscious. Judging by the less damaged floor beneath her feet, she had used some defensive skill or talisman to mitigate the effect of the attack. But clearly it was only partly effective since her wounds had gotten much more serious.

Zac grunted and set off again with **[Loamwalker]**, keeping his eyes peeled for any treasure Tyrbat took out. The man was trying to kill them with his massive wealth, it looked like, and he couldn't let this go on. He swung his axe horizontally, once again imbuing it with the Dao of Sharpness. A

bracelet on the man's hands flashed into life once again, and he briefly turned translucent, letting the blade cut right through him.

However, Zac was ready with a follow-up, and he threw a staggered punch empowered with heaviness right at the man's face. The effect of the ring was limited, and luckily enough, it ran out just before the fist reached his head. A herculean punch hit the man straight in his temple, slamming him down into the ground with enough force to make the mountain peak shudder.

Normally, his head should have been splattered all over the ground, but somehow he was still conscious, though barely. Zac wouldn't stop here and chopped down with finality.

"IMPOSSIBLE!" the man screamed as torrential amounts of Cosmic Energy gathered around him.

But Zac had seen so many last-ditch attacks by now that he didn't even flinch and, with a resounding slam, decapitated the young royal. Zac checked his ladder as he was inundated with energy from the kill, and wasn't too surprised to see that he had risen considerably in rankings, actually reaching top 10 on the Hunter Ladder.

He briefly wondered what troubles would come from killing one of the top Rankers of the other world. The soldier had called him Lord Tyrbat, and Zac remembered he'd held the ninth spot on the ladder, being level 69.

He was likely one of the weaker family members of the Medhin family, but he was still a dangerous opponent. Not necessarily through his own power, but through his army and his treasures. If Zac hadn't been able to kill off most of the soldiers boosting Tyrbat, it would likely have been a far tougher fight.

The fact that one of the royals possessed a private army to empower him meant that it was likely the same with the others. In the beginning, he thought that only the Dominators and perhaps the emperors would pose a threat, but perhaps that wasn't the whole picture.

A wet cough refocused Zac's attention to Thea, who was arduously getting up to a sitting position. Zac threw a last glance at the dead royal before heading over to her. She warily frowned when she saw his approach, but relaxed when she saw him take out a vial.

"A top-grade healing pill," Zac said and threw it over.

Thea hesitated a bit before she caught the vial and took out a pill. She swallowed it after looking it over, nodding toward Zac.

"Thank you," she simply said as she closed her eyes to focus on

recuperation.

ALLIANCE

Zac surveyed the battlefield and finally walked over to the corpse of the Medhin member. He was still decked in all kinds of expensive-looking rings and amulets, and Zac unceremoniously threw the body into his sack so that he could look them over later.

He already knew from before that the Medhin had monopolized all the best stuff from their empire, and the power of the rings proved that the man's equipment might be even better than Zac's own.

Next, he walked through the whole army, looking at each and every one for anything that could be of value. Only the things inside the sacks were transferred over automatically upon a kill, but not the things on their bodies. But it seemed there wasn't really anything of interest.

Finally, he walked over to the downed bodyguard. A large part of his torso was completely ripped off, leaving a grisly wound as he blankly stared up at the sky. Zac sighed and bent down to close his eyes before turning his attention to the shield that lay not too far from him.

It was a different one from the shield he'd seen this man wear at the auction, and it was clearly of high quality. It was slightly dented but otherwise in good condition. That was saying something, because Zac had felt the power of the strikes even when he was down on the stairs. It wasn't the shield that failed, but the user's endurance was simply insufficient to bear the power of Tyrbat.

He walked over to the shield and lifted it up, and found it was extremely heavy, making him feel like he was holding a huge boulder. It was also quite large, covering everything from his head down to his knees when he held it up. He could also see that it had a string of fractals that ran all over the inside

of it.

It might not be a Spiritual Tool like he wanted, but it was far superior to anything he possessed at the moment and would have no problem surviving through the quest to block 5,000 attacks. Unfortunately, he'd found out that he couldn't advance the quests in his human form. Otherwise, he could have finished it by running down the mountain to the beasts for a couple of hours.

It turned out that his Class Quests only were active while he actually had his class, so he would need to turn back into an undead before working on them. However, that posed a bit of a problem at the moment.

It was far easier to turn back to a human for Zac at the moment since Miasma was both the source of life and fighting strength for an undead. It was different for a human, though. Expending all his Cosmic Energy wouldn't have any other effect than completely exhausting him and making him a bit nauseated.

He had a theory that he might be able to turn back into an undead by bleeding himself out since that should empty him of all his vitality. But he wasn't in the mood to try that out unless back at home with someone to watch over him. Also, there might be other restrictions in place, such as how often he could turn.

However, even though the shield would be useful to him, he didn't put it in his bag. It belonged to the Marshall Clan, and the man lying next to him had sacrificed his life to protect Thea from an attack. Perhaps she would be unwilling to hand it over.

"Just take it," Thea suddenly said without opening her eyes, making Zac's brows rise.

Was the woman a psychic? His eyes slightly thinned, and he looked over to the girl calmly sitting ten meters away from him. In response, she opened her eyes and leveled her piercing blue stare toward him.

"You were stomping around like a rhino. I heard what you were doing," she calmly said before closing her eyes again.

Zac didn't comment, but simply put the shield into his bag. Since he'd looted the battlefield, it was time for Zac to go over the spoils, so he focused his attention on his Cosmos Sack.

When he looked inside, he was shocked to see the amount of stuff inside. There was a huge tent along with all kinds of foods and delicacies, and an enormous number of pelts and pillows. The army must each have taken a part of the camp with them to bring it all, as not even Zac himself could carry that

much stuff.

“Just how did these people find each other so quickly?” Zac muttered to himself.

“They just needed to touch when they got teleported and they’d end up at the same place. The Tutorial pixies told everyone that; have you forgotten?” Thea said in response without opening her eyes.

“Well, I didn’t go to the Tutorial, so no one told me,” Zac said with a shrug.

“What? You’re a mortal?” she said, her eyes opening in shock. “Then why are you so strong?”

“Lucky, I guess,” Zac muttered as he gazed upon the palace at the other side of the summit.

It was both larger and in better shape compared to the palace he’d entered on the last mountain, which might hint that the protections in place were superior as well. He could only hope that it was somehow calibrated to a reasonable strength. Otherwise, he would have to scale the mountain somehow to reach the hidden gardens.

But he had a strong feeling there were protections against that in place, which was why he’d gone up the mountain the normal way in the first place. He wouldn’t do any mountain climbing unless he had to. But suddenly, he was dragged out of his thoughts as he noticed Thea was glaring at him with red eyes.

“Uh, are you okay?” Zac hesitantly said, afraid that she wanted her shield back.

“Every day,” she said with a hollow voice. “Every day I’ve fought with my life on the line, one battle after another. Just so that I can protect my family and humanity. But I couldn’t even save John. Instead, he had to sacrifice himself to keep me alive.”

Zac didn’t know what to say and only looked at Thea with some sadness in his eyes. He knew just how it was to feel powerless. Every day the first month on the island, he’d spent sleepless nights being overcome with despair, not knowing whether he’d ever get off the island alive, or whether his family was alive.

“Meanwhile, you just keep getting stronger, increasing the distance between yourself and the rest of us. We thought you might have gained a top-grade cultivation manual from the Tutorial, as that was the only thing that could explain it. But it turns out you’re not even a cultivator,” she said as she

looked up at him with tears of frustration pooling in her eyes.

Zac coughed, a bit uncomfortable from the intensity of the stare. To avoid it, he walked around to her back and placed his hand on her shoulder. She immediately tensed up and shot a glare at him in response.

“I have the Dao of Trees, and it has healing properties. It will speed up the process with absorbing the pill,” he explained as he infused the Dao into her through his hand.

After feeling that nothing was amiss with the energies, she relaxed again and refocused on healing. The silence felt a bit uncomfortable after her outburst, so he started to talk about what came to his mind.

“When the integration happened, I was camping with my girlfriend and three others, but it turned out all four of them were cultivators. The patch of forest we were in got moved, placing me alone on a remote island together with an incursion. That incursion was both a curse and blessing. It made my life a living hell, but closing it also gave me a bunch of advantages,” Zac explained as he kept infusing her with the Dao of Trees.

“You single-handedly closed an incursion?” she asked with shock as she glanced back at him with a look that was a mix of awe and skepticism.

“Well, after their leaders were dead, the rest decided to leave,” Zac said with a shrug, not bothering to explain the details.

Thea thoughtfully looked down before once again closing her eyes to focus on recuperation. Zac helped speed up the healing process for roughly ten minutes before she opened her eyes again.

“Thank you. For saving me,” she said with some difficulty on her face before she got to her feet with some effort. “Okay, let’s go.”

“What?” Zac said with confusion.

“I’ll have to inconvenience you for a bit while I heal,” she said matter-of-factly.

Zac mutely stared at her, his eyes not able to stop darting toward the palace a couple of times. Bringing a seriously wounded person along would greatly impact his gathering speed. There was also the issue that he might have to bear the brunt of the defensive arrays activating twice.

Thea clearly understood what he was thinking about since a sharp aura started to radiate out from her.

“You’re thinking I’ll be a nuisance,” she said with some anger building. “I may be hurt, but I was still able to finish off all the soldiers you missed. Besides, I have many useful skills.”

“I mean, you almost died just now. Perhaps going back to recuperate might be a better idea?” Zac hesitantly said. “Earth is full of opportunities and strong enemies to fight as well. Going back like this isn’t the worst.”

“And miss out on the free levels and titles?” she said, her anger reaching a crescendo. “Fine, you don’t need to waste your precious time. Just go on ahead without me.”

“All right, all right.” Zac sighed. “Let’s just go. There’s a hidden garden in the back of that palace. I think it might contain aged Spiritual Herbs. We might find something that will help heal you faster as well.”

Thea’s eyes lit up at the mention of Spiritual Herbs, and Zac could understand the reaction. Even though the System was flooding Earth with Cosmic Energy, there were very few proper herbs still around. Furthermore, those that were growing were still extremely young and not too potent. It was one of the areas that Earth was lacking the most at the moment.

Since they were done here, Zac started walking toward the palace, but after some hesitation, he ran back and brought the identifiable corpses as well. At first, he’d planned to leave them as a warning that this mountain was occupied in case anyone else arrived, but it might actually backfire and attract one of the stronger Medhin royals.

Since he was accompanied by Thea, who was still in very bad shape even after eating a top-grade pill, he had to lower his speed, giving Zac the opportunity to ask some questions.

“So you know that I fight with axes. I’m not really good at anything other than hitting things and getting hit,” he said, eliciting a small smile from his new companion. “What kind of class do you have?”

Thea hesitated for a bit before answering.

“I guess you could say my class is a mix of a ranger and assassin. I mainly focus on battle as well, but I have some investigative skills,” she said.

Zac nodded, not being too surprised. He and Ogras already suspected she was some sort of assassin class after she managed to cut the demon’s throat without either of the two really seeing what happened.

“Stay close to me when we enter the palace. The arrays will probably be pretty dangerous,” Zac said as he activated his defensive skill preemptively.

“I don’t need you to protect me,” she replied with a huff, but she still moved slightly closer as they approached the entrance.

As soon as Zac pushed open the door, he was met with a wall of earthy smells from a wide variety of herbs and fauna. It felt as though every pore in

his body was revitalized just from breathing, and his eyes lit up in excitement. There were good things in this palace for sure.

He was about to step inside to test the waters, but a hand grabbed his arm.

“What are you doing? Are you just entering?” Thea asked like she was looking at a fool.

“Well, yeah? What’s your idea?” Zac asked.

He’d already ascertained that it wasn’t possible to test the arrays with corpses, and he didn’t believe Thea was an array expert.

“Just wait for a second,” she said as her eyes closed.

The next moment, a chromatic field appeared in front of them. Zac looked over to Thea with confusion and noted she had paled a bit.

“It’s a poison array. Breathing isn’t necessary to get poisoned. It will be able to enter through our pores,” she said with a frown.

Zac glanced over with surprise. It seemed she had a really handy skill for scouting things out. But since he knew it was a poison array, he wasn’t too worried. He took out a vial of black pills whose smell made his nose hair curl up.

“What the hell? Is that feces?” Thea said with wide eyes, taking a few steps away.

Zac only shook his head and swallowed one of the pills with a grimace.

JACKPOT

Thea looked at him, aghast, seemingly not able to comprehend what was happening.

“It’s an antidote pill,” Zac said as he paled a bit. “Or rather, a poison pill that blocks other poisons. Kind of fight fire with fire. Do you need one?”

It was something he’d gotten after Alea poisoned him. It wasn’t specifically to protect against her, but he felt he needed some precautions. He’d been poisoned without even noticing it, and there wasn’t much he could do about it after the fact.

Unfortunately, pills that gave immunity to most poisons were extremely expensive, if you could even get your hands on such a thing. What he swallowed instead was actually a mild poison. It gave similar effects to food poisoning, but that wasn’t why he took it.

The poison also had the effect of blocking up one’s pores, essentially stopping most poisons from entering the body through air or touch. It was a much cheaper alternative to the antidotes and a popular addition to most wandering cultivators’ survival kits.

“I’d rather get poisoned than eat that,” Thea said with disgust, instead taking out a hazmat suit.

Zac looked upon it with interest. It looked like it had been made before the integration, but someone had added rudimentary inscriptions to it. It was clear that the Marshall Clan hadn’t been idle, but rather making inroads in all sorts of things.

“Prototype hazmat suit,” Thea said with some pride after seeing Zac’s gaze. “The fractals protect against tears and make the material even less porous. It stops most particles from passing through. It was made by our

research department not long ago.”

“Pretty impressive,” Zac muttered as he tried to ignore his churning stomach.

He didn’t want to stay any longer and walked right into the array after taking a deep breath. Due to whatever Thea did with her skill, it was extremely clear where the array started and where it stopped. However, something unexpected happened after the two were in the middle of the array.

A tremendous pressure descended upon them, actually forcing Zac down on his knees. Thea was far worse off and immediately was pushed down prone on the ground. There was another hidden array that she had missed.

Its effect was exactly the same as his gravity array back at the Academy, but its effect was supercharged. It was so bad that Thea was barely able to breathe, only able to take in shallow breaths. It was a simple but effective combination. A poison that could kill any trespassers, and a gravity array to keep the trespassers inside the poison until they had to breathe.

Zac arduously got back on his feet, the veins in his head almost popping from the strain. The ground cracked under his weight, and it felt like he was carrying a mountain just by standing up. He slowly walked over to the prone Thea, who helplessly looked up.

Zac bent down with a grunt, but he was actually unable to lift her. He had enough problems keeping himself up, and it was just impossible to add the weight of another to the tally. The extreme exertion from standing inside the gravity array was also quickly depleting his oxygen, and he was already feeling the need to breathe.

Zac shook his head and quickly walked back outside, all the while feeling the burning gaze of Thea. He quickly released his breath and took a new mouthful of air as he looked around before activating **[Hatchetman’s Fury]**.

He hadn’t expected to need to use his boost skill for something like this, but there wasn’t much to do about it. He would just have to lie low for a bit afterward. Violent impulses started to emerge in his mind as he gained a considerable boost in power, but he forcefully pushed them down.

He took another deep breath of air and walked inside the arrays once again. This time, he had no problem walking since he’d gained almost 100 additional Strength from the activation of the skill. It even looked like the poisonous air was pushed away by the power billowing out from his body.

He soon found Thea again, who hesitantly held her token in her hand while still stuck to the ground. But when she saw Zac reappear, her eyes

slightly widened, and she put away the token once again. Zac didn't comment, but only went down and lifted her up from the ground with a grunt.

He hurriedly walked further inside the temple, but it was clear that this array was far thicker than the one he'd passed on the other mountain. Some nervousness started to build as the seconds passed. If he was still inside the array when the buff ran out, he might be in trouble since he wouldn't be able to move due to the period of weakness.

However, luckily, his fears were unfounded as he finally felt the huge pressure lift, almost making him fall over. Zac let Thea down, and she plopped down on the ground and panted heavily. Zac couldn't really see through the hazmat suit, but he couldn't imagine being put through so much pressure could be good for her wounds.

"Are you okay?" he hesitantly asked.

"I'll be fine," Thea said. "Thank you for coming back."

"It's fine. I just needed to take a new breath," Zac answered, but immediately after, he paled and coughed a couple of times.

"Are you poisoned?" Thea asked with worry as she stood up.

"No, I'm fine. I just overextended myself a bit," Zac said with a sigh as he took out a normal healing pill.

The pills helped somewhat with the aftereffects from [**Hatchetman's Rage**], but in the end, it was limited since he wasn't hurt, but rather expended. However, it was better than nothing, and Zac wanted to stay in as good a shape as possible even if he needed to waste some resources.

Besides, it helped alleviate the effects of the poison pill, which might be equally important since he wasn't in the mood to poop his pants in front of a girl.

Thea looked at him with somewhat of a frown, but she didn't comment as she took off her hazmat suit. Zac looked around while she was busy, and he finally noticed they had entered what looked like paradise.

It felt like they were inside some botanical gardens, with a wide variety of fantastical plants and flowers. The courtyard was an explosion of color and smells, almost enough to dizzy the senses. However, Zac could conclude after a brief look that these flowers weren't Spiritual Herbs, but rather mortal flora.

He'd somewhat expected an alchemist or poison master to have high-grade flowers for decorations, but perhaps it was bad for the Cosmic Energy density. In any case, it was a beautiful scene, and Zac and Thea leisurely

walked along the path toward the building proper.

Zac felt it was a bit confusing why the garden looked so pristine. It was the complete opposite to the run-down temples of the first mountain. He realized he'd just assumed that there would be no native people around due to how everything looked when he first arrived, but what if that wasn't the case?

They might very well have just barged in on some poison master's private property. Zac started to get a sinking feeling as he warily looked around, trying to rouse his weakened body. A sudden rustle made Zac activate **[Nature's Barrier]**, startling Thea into a defensive posture as well.

A second later, they saw a figure slowly approach them. However, its appearance was a bit unexpected, making Zac slightly lower his guard. It was a run-down golem that was currently carrying a bucket of water and a pair of shears.

"Hello? Do you live here?" Zac hesitantly asked.

However, the golem completely ignored the two, and it sat down some distance from them and started tending a hedge. Zac and Thea observed it for a bit longer and tried various means to communicate with it. The golem seemed completely oblivious to their attempts, though, giving its tasks its full attention.

"I don't think it's sapient," Thea hesitantly said after they had observed its actions for a bit longer.

"Might be like a servant robot or something?" Zac agreed. "That would explain why the place still looks nice."

"Yeah, but that might mean there are guard robots as well," Thea said with a frown. "Are you in condition to fight?"

"Not at full force for the time being," Zac admitted. "But as long as any defenders aren't past early E-grade, I'll be able to handle it."

"Monster," Thea muttered in annoyance.

Even though there were golems working in the garden, they didn't stop. The enticement of ancient Spiritual Herbs was just too big to ignore. Luckily, they were completely unaccosted as they walked into the palace, with the golems actually bowing and moving out of the way as they passed.

The insides were well tended as well, with well-oiled furniture and potted flowers creating a cozy atmosphere. Zac's fingers started to itch when he saw all the high-quality furniture and decorations. But next, his eyes hesitantly switched to a golem that was currently sweeping the floor.

"Do you think the golems would care if I took the furniture?" Zac said.

“The furniture? Why would you want that?” Thea asked with confusion. “When John and I checked the last mountain, they barely had any value.”

“Well, I still haven’t decorated my place,” Zac said, drawing a raised brow from Thea. “I mean, I’ve been busy with closing incursions and stuff.”

“I don’t think it’s worth risking getting hounded by a bunch of robots so that you can get a new ottoman for your guest room,” Thea said with a shake of her head.

“I’ll just pick them up on the way out,” Zac muttered under his breath. “Rich people don’t know how to be thrifty.”

“Robbing someone’s home is being thrifty?” Thea snorted. “And last time I checked, you’ve been in the first spot of the Wealth Ladder since day one, no matter how much you spent at the auction. We know for a fact that Thomas Fischer held over 100 million Nexus Coins for a brief moment, but even that wasn’t enough to overtake you.”

Zac looked over, surprised. One hundred million coins wasn’t peanuts, and it was pretty impressive that the government leader managed to get hold of that much.

“How do you know that?” Zac asked curiously.

“Spies and having people keeping constant watch of the ladders,” Thea said with a shrug as she walked through a doorway into a large dining area. “The government mapped out everyone’s wealth by increasing Thomas’ wealth incrementally a few days after the auction. Of course, you’re an exception since they couldn’t pass your wealth.”

“That’s a pretty smart idea,” Zac said with praise.

“It doesn’t work with factions like my family or a few of the other independent established forces. We spread out our Nexus Coins, apart from Grandpa, who decided to put himself in the top ten of the Wealth Ladder as a show of strength,” Thea added as she looked around for any hidden compartments or treasures.

“Wait, another array,” Thea suddenly said as she stopped in front of a nondescript door.

Zac curiously walked over, trying to gain any insight from what might be inside from the door, but it truly looked just like any other door in this place. They had opened a few of them, and most were just guest rooms or even empty.

“Can you see what type?” Zac asked as he looked at it.

“Pure defensive shield; we need to find the weak spots in order to—” Thea

started explaining, but was interrupted by Zac punching the shield with enough force to kill an elephant, causing some tremors in the building.

The array cracked like a mirror, giving the two access to the room within.

“You fool, what if you alert all the golems?” Thea said as she agitatedly looked around, the air around her humming.

Zac noticed the odd phenomenon and remembered his and Ogras’ discussions about Thea’s weapon. There were likely some sort of daggers swiveling around her at all times, providing both offense and defense at any time. It was worth remembering, as that meant he could be attacked at a moment’s notice, though Zac doubted Thea would do something like that from their interactions.

“It worked, didn’t it?” Zac said with a small smile and pushed open the door.

However, he didn’t step inside, and instead only looked at the room with a gaping mouth. Thea walked up next to him, and her face soon mirrored his own.

“Jackpot!”

PUBLIC ENEMY NUMBER ONE

Zac had called the palace the Alchemist Palace in his mind, and this room was a final confirmation that he'd been right on the money. It was clear that they had found an alchemist's workshop.

Thick bundles of herbs were hanging from the roof, and they were likely the cause of the thick scent in the room. Unfortunately, they looked completely dried out, and it was unclear whether there was any medicinal efficacy left in them. Along the walls were a few tables full of scrolls and crystals, perhaps containing recipes or experiment notes. There were also vials all over the place, on shelves and strewn on the ground.

However, the clearest indicator that this truly was an alchemist's workshop was the large lidded cauldron in the middle of the room. It was half a meter high and circular, had four stout legs that lifted it a few decimeters up in the air, and there were intricate engravings covering the whole thing from top to bottom.

Cauldrons were used by an overwhelming majority of all alchemists when producing pills, and many were even more expensive than Spiritual Tools. Zac had heard of a few master alchemists who didn't need them any longer and were able to form pills by only using their Cosmic Energy and skills, but these masters were an extremely small minority. Besides, even if those people could concoct pills without a cauldron, they would probably still use it for their more important crafts.

The purpose of cauldrons was to make the pill-making process easier, and they could contain all sorts of inscriptions for this purpose. They could improve heat control, gather Cosmic Energy to infuse into the pills, or just have all kinds of measures to stabilize the highly volatile process of

extracting the useful components from herbs.

The cauldron looked quite extravagant, but Zac didn't have the knowledge to appraise it. He immediately wanted to step inside, but suddenly stopped and hesitantly looked over at Thea.

"How do we decide the split?" Zac asked.

Unless they reached an accord, their cooperation would quickly crumble.

"You saved my life, so I won't take anything from this mountain," Thea said, not seeming to care the slightest about the loss of treasure. "If we find something that will help me heal, I'd like it, though."

"You sure?" Zac said, not being able to help becoming slightly suspicious. "You really don't want anything from all this?"

"It's just the first day; there are so many mountains to loot. Losing out on one isn't the end of the world," Thea said as she threw Zac a look of disdain. "Paranoia isn't a good look, by the way."

Zac scratched his chin, a bit embarrassed. Ogras and the recent events had indeed made him a bit more paranoid. But after being stabbed by both a Janos impersonator and his ex, he felt a healthy amount of paranoia was a bit warranted. You never knew when a dagger was coming for you, and he might not be lucky and turn into his Draugr form next time.

But he also knew that Thea had a stellar reputation. From what he'd gathered during his travels, he'd learned she was known as a lone warrior who didn't play politics. She only focused on getting stronger and defeating the foreign invaders, which garnered a lot of respect in Kingsbury.

Of course, that was just the public image. There were so many hypocrites in the world who worked hard to keep a certain appearance to the public, when they were snakes in reality. However, Zac didn't get that impression from the girl next to him and felt that the public perception was pretty close to reality.

He didn't have any good response to what she said and instead quickly walked inside the workshop. The room had an extremely dense smell of herbs and pills, making Zac wonder just how many pills had been created in this small room.

He wasted no time and went through the room like a hurricane. Zac left nothing behind, not even the empty vials. Even the tables and bookshelves went into the sack, making Zac smile in glee. Only when he'd swept everything apart from the cauldron into his pouch did he stop and check his ladder position.

From looting a hundred corpses outside and the workshop, Zac had jumped up all the way to the twenty-seventh spot on the Gatherer Ladder. It wasn't actually as high as he'd expected since this was the second summit palace he looted. It looked like many others had caught lucky breaks.

Next, he put the cauldron into his sack, and he was shocked to see that he jumped all the way to the fifth position. It was clear that the cauldron was a real treasure in the eyes of the System, likely above anything he'd found so far. He surreptitiously glanced at Thea, who only calmly looked at him wearing his money-crazed grin.

"Looks like the cauldron was a good thing. The Marshall Clan would like to buy it at a later date if you find no use for it," she said with an even voice.

"I'll keep it in mind," Zac said.

He currently didn't have anyone who focused on alchemy back home, but perhaps that was only a matter of time. People with side professions would likely pop up sooner or later on his island. From what he understood, some people started to focus on other things apart from their class at higher grades.

It became increasingly arduous to level up, and gaining all the levels in the E-grade class was expected to take a couple of decades. And even after that, there was the extremely difficult bottleneck of reaching the D-grade class, which could keep people stuck for hundreds of years or the rest of their lives.

If one only focused on the same Daos or breaking through the bottleneck, they'd go crazy over time, so people found other pursuits to relax their minds or gain new inspirations. Sometimes those hobbies became such a large part of their lives that they actually changed over from being a warrior to focusing on things such as arrays or blacksmithing instead.

The two kept looking through every nook and cranny of the house, but they couldn't find anything else of value inside. Thea even used some sort of scouting skill to look for hidden passages or arrays that might indicate spots with value, but she couldn't find anything.

Finally, they went out the back, which also had a beautiful garden. Zac thoughtfully looked over at the golem that was raking a path, wondering if he should try throwing them into his pouch as well. It would be great to have a couple of these things on his compound to beautify and maintain the place without him having to worry about spies or assassins among them.

Soon they reached the edge of the garden, and behind it was an almost completely vertical cliff. Zac could see the mountain he started at from this

vantage, meaning that the garden he'd seen cut into the mountain should be right below him.

He started to scrutinize the cliff, even peering over it to find any method to get down there. But the wall was completely sheer, not providing any opportunities to get down. The only method he could think of was to use a couple of weapons to create footholds as he traversed the mountain down. But even with his monstrous attributes, he was a bit leery about that idea.

"What are you doing?" Thea asked curiously after observing his antics for a while.

"I started on that mountain over there." Zac pointed. "I saw there was a hidden garden cut into the mountain itself. I suspect the good things are kept there. But I can't find any way down, so I'm thinking of cutting footholds into the mountain to get down."

"Well, there might not be any path down if the original owner was a D-grade alchemist. They can fly with the help of Cosmic Energy, after all," Thea said after mulling it over.

"What, really? All of them?" Zac said, looking back at Thea with excitement.

"Well, yeah, from what the Tutorial pixies implied at least," Thea said with a nod. "They used it as an enticement to get stronger and take the more difficult trials. Some classes might gain skills in E-grade that could help them fly as well, but that usually expends energy very quickly."

"That's pretty cool," Zac commented before resuming scrutinizing the wall.

"Wait, over there," Thea said, pointing at a large tree.

"What?" Zac asked with confusion after looking over.

It looked normal and was the same as a couple of similar ones they'd seen in the backyard.

"Something is odd about it, but I can't put my finger on it," she said after some hesitation.

Zac had some faith in Thea's scouting abilities by now and immediately walked over to the tree. He looked it over a few seconds before gingerly touching it, but he didn't sense anything out of place. He'd first thought that it might be an illusion array or fake tree, but he knew he was touching real bark.

"The leaves!" Thea suddenly exclaimed. "Why are the leaves already falling on this tree? The leaves on the other trees have just started to turn red."

Besides, why is it so close to the edge? Shouldn't the ground beneath us be solid stone? Otherwise, the cliff would collapse."

Zac looked up, and it was true. The tree truly differed from the others in that sense. It was an odd mystery, but it didn't really help him in finding a way down to the garden. Zac had an idea, though, and closed his eyes while keeping contact with the tree.

Only seconds later, his eyes opened with surprise. It was truly a tree, but it was actually hollow. It appeared the owner had somehow grown a hidden pathway inside the tree itself, but that caused it to not be as healthy as the other trees in the mansion. He jumped up a couple of meters and looked inside and actually found a hidden staircase leading down into the darkness.

"There are stairs leading down," Zac said with excitement as he peered down at the waiting Thea.

This was like a real-life treasure hunt, and Zac almost forgot the cruel battles that would take place over the coming month. This was something that many kids would dream of finding while playing in the woods. A magical staircase inside a tree leading to hidden treasure.

"I'll stay here and recuperate," Thea said as she sat down under the tree.

Zac was a bit surprised and looked down at her and finally noticed she was noticeably paler compared to before, and she had deep rings under her eyes. The excitement of finding treasure had made him forget she'd almost died an hour ago, and she was far from healed. But even then, she hadn't complained and had even expended Cosmic Energy to look for hidden spaces.

"Okay, I'll be back soon," Zac said as he walked inside the staircase with some shame. Hopefully, he'd find something down in the gardens that could help with her condition.

The hidden path was pitch black and cramped, and Zac missed a foothold after only a couple of steps.

"SHIT!" he screamed as he tumbled down the stairs until he managed to grab hold of the wall.

"Are you okay?" he heard from above and looked up to see Thea peering inside the trunk.

"I just missed the steps, don't worry. Talk to you later," Zac said with some embarrassment and hurried down.

Soon he found himself at the bottom of the staircase, and it clearly led out to the hidden garden. But he hesitated whether he should just exit. In a very

short time, he'd grown accustomed to Thea's observational skills and was a bit leery to just brute force it.

But soon he regained his courage as he smelled the extremely intoxicating herbal aroma coming from the garden outside. He gritted his teeth and exited, his defensive skills working to their fullest. But he breathed out when nothing happened, and he could get a proper look at the garden for the first time.

He realized it would be more appropriate to call it fields rather than gardens, as the area was clearly demarked into four zones growing three different kinds of Spiritual Herbs. There likely had once been four, but one of the fields was completely barren.

Interestingly enough, the soil in all four of them differed as well, and when he walked through the fields, it was as though he was transported to various topographies. The first field had pitch-black soil with a hint of blue, and it grew something that looked like bamboo.

The bamboo poles weren't actually that tall, only reaching roughly five meters in height. But they weren't green like those on Earth and instead had a light blue color. More importantly, they emitted an intensely cold aura, and his hand was actually getting frostbite just after touching one for a few seconds.

He pondered a bit on what to do as he looked at the trees before taking out his axe. The correct handling of Spiritual Herbs was an art, and some herbs could lose much of their efficacy by incorrect harvesting. But he didn't really have any options apart from doing it as carefully and quickly as possible.

One by one, he cut the bamboo trunks down and immediately put them into his pouch before they had the chance to leak any energy, and in just ten minutes, the whole field was harvested. He even rounded up most of the soil and threw it inside as well, since it seemed to be a big part of why the small area felt like a glacier.

Like this, Zac covered the whole hidden garden like a locust, and when he was done, only four pits remained. Zac looked around for any more hidden passages, but it appeared this was it. But he wasn't dissatisfied with the returns, just the opposite.

He'd soared all the way to the first spot on the Gatherer list and in a sense became public enemy number one.

HERBS AND PILLS

The other fields held very different types of herbs compared to the first one. The second field he harvested felt blazing hot like he stood in the middle of a desert or on the edge of a volcano. The herb growing there looked like a small bush that grew up to three intensely red fruits.

The third field had dirt that was far heavier than lead, and it took some effort to dig out the odd brown roots from within the ground. But when he managed to extract them, they emitted strong energies that reminded Zac of Divine Crystals, though they seemed more vibrant somehow.

If he had to make a comparison of the two, then the life-attuned energy in the Divine Crystals felt more synthetic, whereas the energy from the root vegetables felt like a genuine article. It was similar to his lotus seed, though these roots didn't seem quite as good.

The last field, the empty one, seemed to once have been a paddy. But there was a crack in the mountain that had created an outlet for the water inside, making the paddy dry out. Perhaps when calamity struck this sect, the events inadvertently ruined this field through shockwaves.

Another possibility was that the area was prone to earthquakes. He'd noticed a jagged scar in the ground from the first summit. It didn't look like something that had been made from an attack, like the swing of the axe-man in his vision, but rather the movement of a tectonic plate. Perhaps an earthquake had erupted that was strong enough to crack these reinforced mountains.

For the last field, he simply took all the dried mud that lay in the bottom of the paddy, hoping that there would be some dormant seeds inside that could be used to regrow whatever once grew there. It was pretty clear to Zac

that the field was based on four different elements: fire, ice, earth, and water.

Why these four specifically, Zac didn't know, but if he had to guess, the four herbs could combine to make a good pill. He didn't think the previous owner of this place would go to the trouble to create four distinct fields and grow the herbs together if they weren't supposed to get mixed into something.

That was the biggest reason he took all the dried mud. He was currently missing one of the ingredients, and whatever the alchemist of this mountain had planned probably needed all four of them.

He was no expert in Spiritual Herbs, but after sensing the energies they contained, he would say that each of them was a top-grade E-grade Spirit Herb. Or perhaps they were just extremely high-quality Normal E-grade herbs that were overflowing with energy due to being left alone for so long.

It made him think of the Mystic Realm back at Port Atwood. If things could grow this spectacular over a couple of thousand years, who knew what grew inside a pocket of space that might have been isolated for millions of years.

But while the herbs were great, in the end, they couldn't compare to things like the Lotus of Harmony. That thing was a pseudo D-grade plant, and it was on a completely other level compared to these things he'd just harvested.

The fact that he was boosted to the top of the Gatherer list also was an indicator that the herbs likely weren't just F-grade. As he walked up the cramped steps to the summit again, he looked through the ladder to check what else was going on.

There were a few other notable names on the Gatherer Ladder. Emperor Nenotheop was on the third spot, and there was another of their family, Repubat Medhin, in the top ten. The second spot actually belonged to his world as well, as Starlight held that position.

The fourth position was held by the top champion who resisted the Medhin Empire, Beruv Ylvas. The last names on the top ten ladder were completely unknown to Zac, making him believe they were simply random people who had gotten lucky and gotten their hands on something great.

The Hunter Ladder, in turn, was quite different compared to the Gatherer list at the moment, but Zac suspected that they would harmonize soon enough.

Killing people didn't bring in a lot of loot at the moment, but that would

change after a week or two after people had visited more mountains. But some clearly were actively striving to push themselves on the Hunter Ladder, and unfortunately, he saw a name he recognized in the top three: Inevitability.

He had hoped that the System would limit the event to F-grade people, barring the Dominators from entering. That would likely have made him the strongest person inside. But seeing both the emperor and Inevitability on their respective ladders showed that was just a pipe dream.

Apart from Inevitability, he recognized another of the three strongest Dominators in the top five amongst the hunters, a Zhix who called themselves Harbinger. Fortunately, the top name amongst the Dominators, Void's Disciple, wasn't on the list. Perhaps that meant only two of the top three names were present at the hunt, which would be a small blessing.

In fact, the two suspected Dominators weren't the only Zhix on the Hunter list, as Zac saw that a good half of the top ten were Zhix, going by their names. Of course, a few of them could be Medhin Empire champions, since their names were slightly similar.

That the Zhix would be more interested in killing things than looking through various old ruins for things they considered to be corrupted wasn't much of a surprise to Zac. The problem was how to figure out who were Dominators and who were just battle-crazed insectoids.

Besides, it made sense that the Dominators were more interested in the Hunter Ladder compared to the Gatherer Ladder at the moment. They were probably the strongest fighters around and could simply rob others of their treasures later.

But gaining ten levels for the two Dominators was a huge perk. The only good news about the Dominators was that they didn't gain any levels while Zac kept improving. Inevitability had only gained one level since the ladders were made public, and the other two hadn't moved at all.

Gaining ten levels in one move would save them years of cultivation.

Another familiar name on the Hunter list was Salvation, clocking in at the seventh spot. Salvation was still shrouded in mystery, and apart from the rumors that Salvation was the one who controlled the Cradle of God, nothing was known about him or her.

"Congratulations on reaching the top placement," Thea succinctly said when Zac finally emerged from the tree. "Quite a few people will probably target you now."

"Nothing new," Zac said with a shrug as he took out one of the hard,

rootlike vegetables. “This was the only thing I found that might help against wounds.”

Thea caught the hard vegetable and scrutinized it for a bit.

“It looks a bit like ginseng. It isn’t poisonous, but I don’t know how to eat it. It’s even harder than a rock,” she mumbled.

“Perhaps boil it?” Zac ventured.

“Take a break for dinner?” Thea agreed.

“This place is as good as any. Shouldn’t be too many who can pass that combination of arrays to get here,” Zac said.

Thea nodded as she took out a couple of crystals and a pot. The crystals were the same ones he’d seen the Imp Herald use to create a fire, but it wasn’t something Zac himself used very often. He was a bit lazy, so he usually ate dried meat instead to save time.

“Wait,” Zac said as he took out the cauldron he’d snagged earlier. “Perhaps we can cook the root in this instead? Don’t most cauldrons contain inscriptions that stop the energies from escaping?”

“You want to use an expensive cauldron to boil a magical root?” Thea said, mouth curving slightly upwards. “If an alchemist hears about it, he will be enraged.”

“Hey, as long as it works,” Zac said and opened the lid to the cauldron to pour some water inside.

But to his surprise, a cloud of condensed energy blasted him right in his face, and Zac absorbed a huge amount in an instant, to the point that it felt like his body would explode. The medicinal cloud not only canceled out the tired state from using **[Hatchetman’s Rage]** but even made him gain a level.

Zac almost blacked out from being drowned in the medicinal gust, but he noticed a quick movement of something escaping from the cauldron and snatched it up with lightning-quick movement. It was a small purple pill that tried to fly away by itself somehow, making Zac gape in surprise.

“It’s a pill with spirituality,” Thea exclaimed with some shock. “It might actually be the pill that increased your ranking rather than the cauldron.”

“Spiritual Pill?” Zac curiously asked as he put the feisty pill into one of the best vials he’d found in the workshop.

“The same pill can have multiple grades. For example, in the Tutorial, we would be given **[Constitution Pills]** that would push us toward race evolutions. But depending on how hard the missions were that we undertook, there were different ranks, from Low grade to Peak grade. The better ones

held fewer contaminants and stronger effects,” Thea explained.

“As for Spiritual Pills, they’re a tier above Peak-grade pills. They’re the equivalent of a Blacksmith creating a Spiritual Tool. Its efficacy is far better than normal pills, but alchemists can only concoct them when the stars align, so to speak,” she continued.

Zac looked at the pill, which seemed to have calmed down inside the vial. The cloud from earlier was likely just a small taste of the real effect. The fact that just some run-off not only healed him but made him level up was astounding, and he was tempted to swallow the actual pill.

But he forcefully stopped himself, instead deciding to wait for Calrin to take a look at it. The shopkeeper had multiple compendiums detailing all kinds of treasures, both natural and man-made, to never miss out on treasures. Perhaps the Sky Gnome could find out what it was.

“How do you know all these things?” Zac suddenly asked as he looked up from the pill. “From what I know, I should be the only one with direct access to people with direct knowledge of the Multiverse, like the shop owner I brought with me to the auction.”

Thea hesitated a bit before she explained.

“I received a library as a quest reward not long ago. It contains thousands and thousands of crystals detailing all kinds of things. Unfortunately, it doesn’t have cultivation manuals or skills, only knowledge. It does have a few interesting expositions about the fundamentals of Dao from various strong people of the Multiverse, though,” Thea said.

Her explanation was a good reminder that he wasn’t the only one who had gained Limited Structures on Earth. If he could get a Creator shipyard and a Dao Repository, it wasn’t too surprising that other powerhouses could get other things.

It wouldn’t be surprising if the world government and Salvation also had obtained hidden structures that empowered their factions. The fact that she got that building might also be an indicator she had either closed an incursion or become a Lord recently, as those were the ways that Zac got his buildings. But he didn’t want to dig into those things at the moment.

“Sounds like a good thing to have,” Zac simply said as he prepared the cauldron to be used as a pot.

Soon a fire was burning beneath it with a boiling root inside, but the cauldron didn’t release the slightest heat or Cosmic Energy. It showed that all the energies from the ginseng were contained inside, not able to escape.

“Do you have any opinions on where to go next?” Zac said as he observed the cauldron.

Thea pointed at a certain mountain to the east without hesitation.

“That one,” she said.

“How did you decide that quickly?” Zac asked, surprised.

“I removed the two mountains we came from and chose the remaining close one with the largest castle,” Thea explained while keeping her eyes on the cauldron. “This residence was much bigger than the one on the mountain I started at, and the rewards were far greater as well.”

Zac nodded in agreement, as he had experienced the same thing.

“Others will quickly realize the same thing,” Zac said. “We might be in for pretty tough battles at those places.”

“Well, we’re both top Rankers. There are not many who would be a threat,” Thea said.

“The Dominators are here, though,” Zac said with a shake of his head and told her what he’d learned from Ibtap since the auction.

“Both are around level 100 and at the top of the Hunter Ladder?” Thea said with a frown. “Do you think they are hunting beasts or people?”

“Anything that moves, but I think they should probably stay down between the mountains; there are fewer things to kill up at the summits. Only a few will have a bunch of people at the same time,” Zac guessed. “Besides, everyone needs to go down to change mountains, so the prey would come to them.”

“Well, the risk of running into them is pretty slim,” Thea said. “And we should be able to stay alive long enough to crush our tokens if it comes down to it.”

“Fair enough,” Zac said as he lifted the lid of the cauldron.

To the surprise of both of them, the root that once looked like a grubby rock had disappeared, but the water it was cooked in had turned into something that would be right at home at a gourmet dinner. It was a clear soup that smelled absolutely delectable, and Zac swallowed a mouthful of drool after smelling the aroma.

“Well, go ahead,” Zac said, trying to ignore his mouth watering even as he spoke.

DARKNESS

“What’s with that face?” Thea said with a small smile as she scooped the soup with a ladle. “Don’t you still have the cauldron and a bunch of these things?”

“I guess,” Zac said as he took out a piece of meat from the E-grade tiger and tore into it.

The cloud of energy from the trapped pill had completely refilled his reserves, but he was still a bit hungry. The two were content to switch to small talk as they ate their dinner, neither seeming really interested in talking about things like their respective factions or plans for the hunt.

It was a simple dinner, but Zac felt it was a welcome respite from all the responsibilities back at his island. He also sensed that Thea was feeling the same way, and she never made any attempts to gain any knowledge about his faction or personal power.

Thea said that the vegetable had a greatly nourishing effect, and Zac could see that she had regained color to her face. Since they’d had their dinner and Thea was feeling better, they immediately packed up afterward and got ready to head out. The mountain was completely sheer on this side, stopping them from any plans of making a descent here, so they had to go back from where they came.

Besides, Zac wasn’t completely done with the palace. As soon as they entered the garden again, Zac immediately flashed over to one of the gardener automatons and picked it up by its neck. It actually went completely still, not struggling or resisting in the slightest.

The next moment, it simply disappeared, entering Zac’s Cosmos Sack. He breathed out in relief since he wasn’t sure it would be possible to store those

things. He already knew that it wasn't possible to store Sapient golems, such as the Creators, but these things were basically just machines that ran on Cosmic Energy.

They spent the next five minutes scouring over the whole place, and in the end, Zac found fourteen golems. They also found a couple of them that were broken down and didn't move, and Zac snatched those as well. Perhaps he could find someone who could repair them in the future, so leaving them would be a waste.

Of course, Zac also snatched everything that wasn't nailed down in the house, leaving an empty husk of a mansion. Thea wasn't idle either, plucking all kinds of flowers and seeds.

"Those aren't Spiritual Herbs, you know?" Zac said as he saw her take a flower that stood in a windowsill.

"I know, but they are beautiful. Haven't you realized most of these flowers don't exist on Earth? I might be able to transplant a couple if they survive the sack," she explained with some anticipation in her eyes.

It felt reasonable, so Zac did the same and gathered a couple of types he thought that Kenzie might enjoy having in her garden. It might also help the golems acclimatize if they recognized some of the flowers.

After that, they were finally done and exited through the same path as they entered. Just like with the other mansions, they weren't accosted by the array on the way out, saving Zac the effort of having to carry her again through the gravity array.

The mountain was still completely desolate when they exited, and no warning bells went off in Zac's mind from hidden threats. Perhaps someone had come but, seeing the crater full of human remains and the other signs of an intense battle, chose to retreat.

The two quickly oriented themselves and descended in the direction of the mountain Thea chose. After discussing it, they decided to skip the buildings lower down on the mountain. It simply wasn't worth it to go over the servants' quarters with their limited time. Their efforts were better spent on scaling as many summits as possible.

While there were magnificent mountains as far as they could see, there were almost a hundred thousand trial takers. If all scaled a couple of mountains a day, it was possible that all the treasure would be snatched up well before the month was up. The more of the top-tier treasures that went into their pouches immediately, the better, since people could leave with their

loot at any moment.

Zac was at first afraid Thea wouldn't be able to keep up with him barreling down the mountain at breakneck speed, but she clearly had no problem on that front. It was also evident that her Dexterity was well above his own, as it conversely was Zac who was forced to struggle to keep up.

While he rushed down like a bull, she nimbly jumped down using anything from a branch to an outcropping as a foothold, not being restricted at all by the winding path. Zac wondered if that kind of footwork was a skill since he was completely unable to move like that, even with his impressive amount of Dexterity.

Sometimes it looked like she would plummet to her death, but she simply landed on some almost indiscernible ledge and kept going down alongside him. With their pace, it didn't take long for them to reach the foot of the mountain, and they stopped their mad dash.

"That palace we saw was two mountains over. Should we stay down here or go over the mountain ahead?" Zac asked.

"Up to you," Thea said.

"Let's take the passage. It's a bit longer, but there are so many beasts here to help grind the ladder," Zac said and eagerly took out his axe.

Thea had no objections and simply nodded. Zac immediately set off, rushing through the dense forest covering the valleys between the mountains. The shade was almost perpetual at the forest floor, as the little sun that got past the mountaintops was blocked by the canopy.

The trees themselves were quite tall and had almost all their branches far up in the sky. As for vegetation on the forest floor, there wasn't too much of it. There were quite a number of boulders that might have fallen down from the mountains, though, and also rubble of broken-down buildings.

It looked like there had been towns that went all along the mountains, forming pockets of populations between the towering mountains. These buildings, or rather, the remains of them, were far shoddier and mundane compared to the glistening palaces on the mountaintops.

It made Zac wonder if these were the towns of normal mortals, living close to the mountains for protection by the cultivators. Had people living down here once looked up at the magnificent palaces and dreamed of becoming a powerful warrior as well?

The travels through the forest went just like Zac expected. It only took a couple of seconds before he was accosted by a bunch of rats. He made short

work of them with his axe, not even bothering to summon a fractal edge for these vermin.

Thea clearly had a competitive bone, as she immediately started slaughtering beasts as well, even running off in the wrong direction to find additional prey to kill. Beasts fell by the wayside, most of them with a large tear in their throat, bleeding them out in seconds.

Her speed of clearing out animals was slightly faster than his own, even after he started using **[Loamwalker]** to shorten the time between the packs. However, Zac didn't see it as a discrepancy in power, but rather that her skill set seemed more suited to their situation.

Zac could improve his speed of killing as well if he summoned a couple of fractal edges and shot them at beast packs in the distance, but he would create a spectacle if he did so, mowing down trees and destroying ruins.

He wouldn't alert any potential threats just to kill a couple of additional rats, which allowed Thea to gain an edge on him for the moment. She flittered through the woods like a silent reaper, and anything within thirty meters of her died.

The scene allowed Zac to form a more educated opinion about her skill set. First of all, it was obvious that there were numerous invisible weapons around her, not just one. He'd seen well over ten beasts die simultaneously by getting their throats slit individually. He absently wondered just how she controlled so many blades at the same time. Was she able to split her focus in so many directions at once?

Secondly, her range of attacks seemed to be around fifty meters at the most, as no beast further than that died from her blades. However, Zac didn't discount the possibility that she was holding back, not showing her maximum range. Taking things for granted was how one got killed, after all.

From there on out, it was pretty straightforward. The two kept a rapid pace until they reached their destination and, without taking a break, climbed it as well.

When they reached the peak, they saw a couple of corpses and a group of eight people standing outside the palace, and it seemed they were discussing methods to get in. They all wore individual gear, making Zac unsure whether they were from Earth or the other planet. But they likely weren't from the Medhin Empire, since they all seemed to be wearing the same thing.

They were of middling rank for both the Hunter and Gatherer Ladders, and all seemed decently strong. One of them spotted the two of them

immediately, even though they had taken care to make no sound as they approached. The moment the two were discovered, the whole group of men looked over.

“Flee!” one of them screamed, and the group frantically threw out large balls at the ground between themselves and Zac, which each exploded into a firestorm.

Zac only gawked in surprise at the inferno that reached almost ten meters in the air in front of them.

“Pretty smart, creating a firewall while they flee. Your ladder rankings will make it hard to rob most people unless we catch them unaware,” Thea commented, not bothering with hunting down the group.

“Well, I don’t think those guys had much of value in any case. They couldn’t even get past the array,” Zac said as he swung a huge fractal edge at the flames, the force of his swing dousing the fire immediately.

With the help of Thea’s skills, they didn’t have much trouble entering the palace, and both had respectable gains from it, and it even helped Thea reach the fifty-third spot on the ladder from her earlier spot in the thousands. Since the cooperation worked well, they kept going for the rest of the day, going from one mountain to another until it was pitch black outside.

By this point, they had scoured four mountains in total, encountering almost no resistance. They had seen a few people who either fled or crushed their tokens the moment they saw them, and also caught a couple of people unaware.

Thea had a pretty straightforward tactic where she robbed everyone whose Hunter position was higher than their Gatherer position, and depending on how evil they seemed, either killed them or crushed their tokens. The others, she simply ignored.

Zac robbed only people who had a decent placement on the ladder, but he kept increasing his requirements since his Cosmos Sack was quickly filling up with junk.

It was currently pitch black outside, and the two stood inside one of the summit palaces, deciding whether they should keep going or call it a day. The sky was almost completely devoid of stars, and the world they found themselves in didn’t even have any moon to reflect some light down on them during the night.

Zac’s increased attributes didn’t give him night vision, so he couldn’t even see his hand in front of him with how dark it had gotten. It felt a bit

suffocating, so he took out a lantern that ran on Nexus Crystals that lit up the immediate surroundings.

But oddly enough, it was as though the darkness was pushing back the light, making the lantern unable to light up anything apart from the immediate vicinity.

“That’s pretty odd,” Thea said with some worry in her voice, seeing the weird phenomenon as well. “There is something wrong with the darkness.”

“Perhaps we should stay inside these arrays for the night,” Zac hesitantly said.

Honestly, the situation was a bit spooky. Something had completely destroyed this place once upon a time, leaving not a soul behind. And now the darkness was acting up. Zac was about to ask for Thea’s opinion, but a screen appeared in front of him.

[Darkness descends. Tokens deactivated. Survive.]

SALVATION

“Uh, did you get that prompt as well?” Zac said and turned to Thea, who had paled a bit.

“Yes,” was all she said as she vigilantly looked around, trying to pierce the darkness with her gaze. She also moved a bit closer to Zac and his lantern.

It looked like the System had something planned after all. People killing each other for treasure wasn't enough, it appeared; the System also felt the need to remove their safety net at an inopportune time. If he knew the System, it had orchestrated some sort of trial that would either kill them or help them get stronger.

“Feels like we're in some horror movie,” Zac muttered as he kept looking around for anything to pop out from the darkness.

Nothing happened as the minutes passed, but that did nothing to calm Zac's fraying nerves. It still felt like something was brewing, and the darkness kept getting stronger. Soon the lantern only reached half the distance compared to before, creating a small circle of light with just him and Thea inside.

The few stars in the sky had long winked out of existence, and it felt like it was only the two of them set adrift in the void. At first, it almost felt like the odd space he'd found himself in when he rolled for survival, but this darkness was different.

There was something sinister and oppressive about the gloom that surrounded them, whereas that odd space had been completely sterile. If Zac turned off the lantern in his hand, they would be completely swallowed by the dark, whereas the other space had had some odd unseen source of light.

Any idea of heading to the next mountain to look for treasure was completely forgotten, and now Zac was only focused on survival. He was extremely happy he'd decided to keep going with Thea, as sitting alone in this environment would have been way more nerve-racking.

He quickly glanced over at his companion, and she returned a look that told him that she felt the same way. Neither of them spoke, though, afraid of drawing the attention of whatever was lurking out in the dark.

Suddenly, Zac thought he heard something, and he hesitantly glanced over to his right. But of course, only darkness met his gaze. However, the sound kept growing clearer, and soon Zac could make out some incessant whispering.

Zac's neck hair stood right up, and he discreetly spoke up.

"Do you hear those whispers?" Zac said with as low a voice as he could.

A nod from a deathly pale Thea was all the confirmation he needed.

When he saw the prompt, he had assumed that the System would unleash a horde of beasts upon him, just like with the beast hordes. But perhaps that wasn't exactly the case. He nervously fiddled with the bangle on his arm as he took active control of his mental defense skill.

The minutes passed as the whispers grew more intense, and Zac was starting to feel the strain. He couldn't tell exactly what the voices were, but he assumed it was something like evil spirits. Their whispers were a pervasive mental attack, and it almost felt like they tried to burrow themselves into his head.

"Some sort of wraiths," Thea said, seeming to be under an equal amount of pressure. "They are trying to possess us."

Zac grunted in affirmation as he kept rebuffing the insidious murmurs. A few minutes later, it seemed the whispers had reached a peak, and thankfully, the intensity didn't keep increasing. Zac felt a bit relieved since he felt confident that he would be able to bear the mental burden through the night if needed.

A glance over at Thea showed that she seemed to be mostly fine as well, and she was currently holding on to an inscribed rock that looked like an ostrich egg. It probably was some mental protection tool she had attained somewhere.

Suddenly, a piercing wail with enough force to cause undulations in the air hit Zac with enough force to make him completely blank out for a brief moment, losing control over **[Mental Fortress]**. Instantly, he felt a chill in

his mind, followed by a chaotic jumble of disorienting thoughts.

Hatred.

Thea had leeches off him for a whole day, stealing the treasures that were rightfully his. Using him as a shield to brave the dangers of the arrays, laughing behind his back. Insidious, treacherous.

Something needed to be done.

An all-consuming killing intent as he turned his murky eyes toward her lithe neck, his fingers itching. He could just reach out, and with a snap, he would be vindicated.

Suddenly, a tomahawk was in his hand, taken out from his Cosmos Sack. Thea looked over with surprise, only to see him swing it down to gore his own thigh. The next moment, a thick vibrant aura of life exuded from Zac after having activated his Dao Field for his Dao of Trees.

“What are you doing?” Thea asked as she cautiously looked at Zac like he had become a lunatic.

Zac panted for a few seconds, his forehead covered in a sheen of perspiration before he looked up with clear eyes once again.

“I think I got possessed, but the pain woke me up enough to release my Dao Field. The Dao of Trees has been effective against ghosts before, so I thought it might help,” Zac said.

That was a close one. It had been extremely disconcerting to feel a bunch of consciousnesses in his mind, urging him to perform unspeakable acts. It was like he had been afflicted with schizophrenia, unable to discern what was real and not.

Luckily, Zac had some experience of his mind being flooded with violent impulses thanks to his **[Hatchetman’s Rage]** skill, and it had allowed him to perform two last-ditch efforts. Wounding himself wasn’t optimal, but the pain had cut through the chaotic jumble in his mind and allowed him to unleash his Dao.

For a split second, his mind had been flooded with pained wails as the Dao purged the specters or whatever the whispering things were, and they scrambled out of his head, away from the vibrant Dao.

He also noticed that the effect of the Dao of Trees was great, silencing the penetrating whispers to a low murmur. However, the response was almost immediate, and a claw stretched out of the darkness, heading straight for his throat.

Zac immediately swung his tomahawk, but it went straight through the

incoming attack. Zac frowned as he gathered some Cosmic Energy while he took out [**Verun's Bite**], swinging it before the claw managed to reach him.

Luckily, the hand was cut, and to Zac's surprise, something that looked like black ichor dripped down the edge of his axe before it turned into a black haze that drifted away. These things perhaps weren't actual ghosts, but some nefarious creation that just looked similar. But before Zac had time to sigh in relief, tens of claws reached out of the darkness, and a few ghastly faces emerged as well.

They were humanoid but without any facial features apart from a huge maw that seemed to contain a black hole. The hair was standing straight out on Zack's whole body by now, but there was nothing to do except start swinging like a madman.

He summoned a huge fractal edge, and with a growl, let it rip through the crowd of humanoids, shredding them to pieces. However, he wasn't happy with the result. The things were clearly destroyed into motes of darkness, but he didn't gain a smidgeon of Cosmic Energy from the kills.

That kills rewarded Cosmic Energy was one of the most fundamental aspects of the Multiverse, and not gaining anything should mean that these things didn't die when they were destroyed.

They did not reform, though, at least not immediately, which gave Zac a brief respite until he once again was thronged with wraiths.

"I can't kill them," Thea said with some franticness in her voice.

"Me neither," Zac said. "Perhaps we just need to keep them at bay until sunrise."

Thea didn't have any better idea, so they placed themselves back to back with the lantern glowing in between them.

The assault of the beings wrought from darkness kept increasing in intensity. In the beginning, they were just fodder and were instantly disintegrated with a swing by Zac. But after a couple of hours, they were almost as strong as the demon warriors back on the island.

One by one, they still wouldn't be a problem, but they were endless. Worse yet, they were completely unheeding of their own safety since, apparently, they couldn't die. They were content in sacrificing themselves just so long as they managed to deal any kind of damage.

Small wounds started to accumulate on Zac's body, but these levels of wounds were nothing to Zac, who kept stoically swinging his axe. However, Thea didn't possess the same endurance as Zac did, and started to wane after

four hours. That left Zac to cover two-thirds of the circle of light. Still, it was better than being alone and getting accosted from all around, so Zac didn't complain as he kept swinging.

The night finally passed, and Zac slumped down, completely exhausted. The assault had thankfully ended the moment the night was broken by the first rays of dawn. Thea was already holding an E-grade crystal in her hand, absorbing it while rotating her cultivation technique.

She had a few wounds on various parts of her body, and it appeared a few of her old ones had reopened. Zac soon did the same and took out an E-grade crystal as well. He was almost completely spent, and what was worse, he had barely made any gains from the desperate struggle.

What a horrible night.

What a glorious night.

Gabriel couldn't help smiling as he stood barefoot at the summit, the ragged bedsheets he had fashioned into a robe fluttering in the wind from the residual shockwaves from the battle. He closed his auburn eyes for a moment and swept his long oily hair back as he sighed in contentment.

The voices of the lost had clamored for relief as they gathered around him for redemption all through the night. He was the light bringing the wayward sailors back toward shore, the divine shepherd. The whispers begged for passage into his mind, and he had gladly obliged.

Gabriel couldn't help licking his mouth at the memory, ignoring the horrified whimper from below. The sustenance he gained from delivering salvation to the wretched specters during the night was as effective as weeks of hard work.

The universe had even awarded him with two levels due to his hard work to emancipate those lost in the darkness. It would have been more if the voices hadn't shied away after their brethren entered his mind and were granted salvation.

Gabriel could only pray to the Great Redeemer that the lost children of the dark would come back tonight as well so that he could continue his mission from God. In the meantime, there was much work to be done.

He finally looked down at the man who had been the cause of unrest this

morning. The man was somewhere in his forties and looked foreign to Gabriel. The man was decked out in an elaborate golden robe, and it appeared that he was a ruler of the other world that had joined him in this so-called hunt.

When he had seen Gabriel, he had immediately tried to leave, but Gabriel wouldn't have it. Almost a hundred men who were cursed by their freedom; how could he ignore such a plight? He had immediately attacked, sacrificing almost half of his Silver Guards without batting an eye.

These Apostates had fought hard against salvation, damned by their ignorance. Their leader had even been infused with the power of the soldiers, reaching powers beyond anything Gabriel had ever seen before, apart from the Great Redeemer himself, of course.

But how could a mundane ruler stop a messiah on a mission? The soldiers who fought alongside this royal had already joined the crusade, silently standing behind him with their new brethren.

"Through pain comes clarity," Gabriel said with equanimity. "Through clarity comes salvation. Join the crusade."

"No, please let me go. I've already given you all my treasure, and you've taken my army," the golden-robed man said with utter terror in his eyes as he looked upon his former subordinates. "You have taken everything. No need to make the Medhin Empire an enemy. I am the eighteenth son, Supratej Medhin, and I can help you in various ways."

"Neither king nor pauper can avoid the reckoning. Bask in the Great Redeemer's glory," Gabriel said, his eyes burning with an inexorable conviction.

"The Great...?" the Medhin royal said, his brows rising. "Wait! I am—"

But he didn't get any further as Gabriel ignored him and started the purification.

He bent down and gently tapped Supratej's head, just like he had done with tens of thousands of others. A silver fractal appeared on the head of the recruit's forehead, and the Medhin princeling stopped struggling, his eyes turning blank.

The two Silver Guards stopped holding him down and instead bowed toward Gabriel and returned to the ranks of the Silver Crusaders.

Gabriel didn't give the two a second glance and instead reverently looked down at his new parishioner. Even seeing the transformation innumerable times over the past months hadn't killed off the surge of euphoria he felt

when bringing another lost lamb into the fold.

The silver glow of the Redeemer's Light quickly flowed through the whole body of the man, the fractal in his forehead absorbing a great amount of Cosmic Energy from the atmosphere. Gabriel suddenly received a large amount of Cosmic Energy as well, showing that the purification was a success.

The Cosmos Sack at the parishioner's waist turned into lights that entered Gabriel's own, but he couldn't care less for some material possessions. He still hadn't deigned to use the thing since he arrived, as the Great Redeemer had already provided him with all he needed.

A small translucent copy of the man appeared out of the fractal on the man's forehead, and it appeared to be howling in pain and fear. Gabriel knew the lost soul just didn't understand the great gift that it was being given, and didn't get angry about it.

The soul soon entered the golden fractal on Gabriel's own forehead, and soon it had joined the others in unity. The body of the new parishioner slowly stood up, its skin tone now a divine silver, and wordlessly joined the rest of the army. The Army of God in this temporary hunt was now over three hundred strong.

Gabriel couldn't help feeling some jealousy as he glanced at the stoic back of his new Silver Guard. He was now unburdened by things such as a soul and discordant thoughts, and instead became a part of the unity. He knew his own deliverance would come sooner or later, but not until his work was complete.

Existence is pain, sapience a curse. But he was Salvation.

DIPLOMACY

Zac and Thea decided to stay inside the protective enclosure of the summit array in order to rest up before starting the day. Both were completely exhausted, neither having slept a wink the whole night. They simply sat down a few meters from each other as they restored their reserves.

It was normally no problem for them to go a few days without sleep, but with threats both known and unknown all over this trial, they didn't want to take any chances. A mistake from tiredness could quickly have dire consequences.

Oddly enough, the area was completely devoid of any Cosmic Energy after the darkness receded, forcing them to only rely on crystals. Thea was still far quicker to restore herself back to fighting condition due to speeding up the absorption with her cultivation manual, and after roughly an hour walked over to Zac, who opened his eyes.

"I will sleep a bit. Can you guard me for two hours before we swap?" she said, looking over at Zac.

"No problem. I still need some more time to refill my batteries." Zac nodded.

That was the first time he saw a cultivator restore themselves, and he couldn't help but become a bit jealous of the speed. He estimated her to be able to absorb Cosmic Energy around three times quicker than he himself, and that was one of the side benefits of being a cultivator.

It was even more frustrating when he felt that his body would be able to handle far larger streams of Cosmic Energy than what he currently was able to drag out of his crystal. This was nothing compared to the massive energies that had coursed through his body before. But he simply had no method to

speed up the process.

Thea walked a few meters away and took out a small but high-end tent from her Cosmos Sack. It was clear it was another creation of the craftsmen of the Marshall Clan, since the nylon tent was covered with low-grade runes.

They were so basic that even Zac could tell that their purpose was simply to make the material sturdier, but it was better than nothing. Thea crawled inside and closed the flap behind her, and in just seconds, he could hear the even breaths of someone asleep.

Zac kept absorbing the energy from his Nexus Crystal as he kept watch, going over the events of the night. It was extremely frustrating that he'd fought so hard, yet there was not a single Nexus Coin or any energy as a reward.

He'd tried using all his Daos and skills, but nothing had managed to kill the weird specters. The Dao of Trees was far superior to anything else in destroying the things, but it wasn't able to actually kill them. For all he knew, he was actually fighting the same things over and over after they reformed.

However, the night wasn't completely without its rewards. His skill **[Mental Fortress]** had actually advanced to Late stage from Zac using it constantly to prevent himself from getting possessed again.

The upgrade didn't bring any changes to the skill apart from making it sturdier. Even the cost of using it was the same as before. While it wasn't very exciting, Zac still felt that it was just what he needed in his current situation.

If this became a nightly event, the upgraded skill would be a godsend.

Next, he opened up his ladder, and what he saw was extremely surprising. The first thing he noticed was that Salvation had actually sailed all the way up to the first spot on the Hunter Ladder. Zac frowned and opened up his normal Power Ladder from Earth.

To his shock, he saw that Salvation had gained two full levels during the night, something that felt almost incomprehensible. He was now level 55, only seven levels behind Zac. Of course, those levels were a great chasm, but Zac worried that they might actually be bridged faster than he'd hoped.

Either Salvation had met with a very different trial during the night, one that gave a lot of Cosmic Energy, or he had been able to slay the specters. Zac actually hoped more for the first scenario. If Salvation could massacre the endless ghosts during the night, he might actually pass Zac in levels if he kept going for the whole month.

Zac wasn't so petty that he didn't want others to pass him, but this situation was a bit problematic. The rumors surrounding Salvation and his Cradle of God weren't great. If he managed to attain E-grade and the titles Zac assumed would come with the evolution, it might spell trouble.

The second shock to Zac was the sheer number of remaining participants. While Zac desperately fought within the darkness, he'd thought that there might only be a handful of surviving participants after that insane assault, but he was proven wrong by the ladders.

There were still a full eighty thousand participants in the trial, which completely baffled Zac. How could others fight through that kind of assault and survive? He personally would have barely made it if he was alone, and he actually guessed that not even Thea would survive alone unless she had some aces up her sleeve.

That thousands and thousands of people of middling power were still running about was extremely surprising. Zac could only guess that the assault was somehow adjusted to the power of the participants, and others wouldn't have to withstand such a strong assault.

Another possibility was that it was related to the palaces. The atmosphere was still a bit glum, and while the Cosmic Energy was gradually restoring itself, it was still extremely sparse. It was a stark contrast to the extremely dense energy that had covered the top-tier palaces they'd visited yesterday.

The mountains clearly had some sort of arrays that gathered the energy of the atmosphere to create cultivator havens up on the summits. If the ghosts fed on Cosmic Energy, it would make sense that they would gather at the top-tier palaces, where the density was the highest.

Perhaps Zac and Thea had simply found themselves at the ghosts' feeding ground, which had resulted in their frenzied assault.

The weaker participants would likely not be at a summit during the night since the risk of meeting powerhouses up there was higher. And they should have learned by now that the summit arrays were extremely strong and not something they could break through.

Another indicator that this might be the case was that another of the Medhin royals had fallen during the night, since his name had been removed from the list. Perhaps he did the same as the two of them, staying within one of the palace arrays for safety.

Thea got out of her tent two hours later on the dot, and the two swapped places. Zac didn't bring a tent for himself since he was used to sleeping

outside, so he simply rested his back against a tree and closed his eyes. But he kept his axe in his hand in case something happened.

Later in the morning, the two descended the mountain, heading for another palace three mountains over. They had decided to keep going like yesterday since the events during the night shouldn't affect their treasure hunting.

They didn't encounter anyone for most of the descent, but they actually spotted a woman blankly staring at a man who seemed to have died recently. Zac and Thea shared a silent nod, and Zac disappeared the next moment.

A split second later, he reappeared holding the woman by the scruff of her shirt. She looked to be in her thirties and had quite a few scars. She was also covered in a few bandages, and judging by how wet they were, the wounds were recent.

Both her ladder positions were in the last quartile, and it wasn't really worth it to either rob or kill her. Zac was simply after information. Since she was within arm's reach, he let her go, knowing that he could stop her before she could take out her token and crush it.

The woman fearfully looked at Zac and Thea, and suddenly, her eyes widened further in horror. She had likely checked their ladder positions, learning that she was caught by some of the most powerful people in the hunt.

"We are not interested in your life or your treasures. We want to ask you about what happened to you during the night," Zac simply said.

The woman breathed out in relief before glancing at the corpse.

"My husband and I got a prompt that darkness descends, and it got very scary," she started explaining without any preamble. "Suddenly, we heard an extremely loud wail. That's when it got crazy."

"Crazy?" Thea probed.

"My husband went mad. He actually tried to bite my throat. These wounds are from him biting and scratching me. It got so chaotic, I had to kill him in self-defense," she said, her eyes reddening. "We knew that we might not survive this hunt, but not like this..."

"I'm sorry; it seems your husband was possessed," Zac said with a sigh. "What happened next?"

"There were a few ghosts that attacked me later, but the rest of the time, I stayed huddled with my back against a rock," she said.

Zac frowned and looked over at Thea, who only shrugged. They asked a

few more questions after that, but it was clear that she had barely been attacked during the night. She had somewhat discerned some whispers, but it had only been at the start of the night.

They let her go afterward, and they saw her store her husband's body before she crushed her token. It seemed the events of the night had crushed her spirit, making her unwilling to stay in the hunt. Zac felt leaving was the right choice; it was meaningless to die for treasure.

As the two kept proceeding toward their targeted mountain, they caught a few more treasure hunters, and their stories were similar. In the groups with multiple members, at least one had turned insane and was either killed or subdued.

However, they encountered another interesting case when they caught a solo hunter. He had admitted that after hearing that penetrating wail at the start of the night, he completely blacked out and didn't remember anything before waking up on top of a corpse, drenched in blood.

It was the same with those who got subdued in the groups. When morning arrived, they came to again, not remembering a single thing. It appeared that getting possessed might not necessarily result in death. It would instead turn one into a bloodthirsty beast, and whether you survived depended on whether you encountered weaker prey or stronger predators.

The piercing wail was also something everyone mentioned, even after they had traveled over ten mountains in the afternoon. Everyone had clearly heard it, and it felt like a mental attack. Zac initially thought the wail had originated from their own mountain, but that wasn't the case.

Just what kind of ghost could scream so loudly that everyone heard it across the whole mountain range? It seemed that there was a big boss ghost somewhere that was the originator of the wail. Were there perhaps some hidden rewards for killing that thing? What other secrets did this place hold?

Zac knew he wouldn't attempt killing the thing, even if it reaped some great rewards. He couldn't even kill the small buggers; just how would he kill the leader ghost that was strong enough to attack everyone on multiple mountains simultaneously?

A sudden heavy thumping of feet on the ground dragged Zac out of his musings, and he turned around to see what kind of beast was running toward them this time. However, what he saw was no beast. The moment Zac turned, he spotted the largest Zhix that he had ever seen, almost half a meter taller than the Anointed of his own hive, Nonet.

Zac immediately opened up the ladder and breathed out in relief when he saw that it wasn't one of the two E-grade Dominators. Since that was the case, he didn't feel they were in trouble. Still, this Anointed radiated immense power, and they clearly didn't care about Zac's and Thea's ranks since it emitted unbridled killing intent.

Thea readied herself for battle with a determined glare, but Zac waved at her to stand back.

"Let me handle this. I trained in Zhix diplomacy before coming here," Zac said while taking out the ceremonial dagger he'd received from Ibtep.

He took a few steps toward the Anointed barreling toward him and held up the dagger. He said nothing, instead only cutting his palm before stabbing the dagger into the ground.

The Zhix actually stopped in their tracks in surprise, but soon after took out a dagger of their own. They also silently cut their wrist, stabbing it down as well, which made Zac internally sigh in relief.

The next moment, the two veritably disappeared before they clashed with tremendous force. The Zhix's huge fist slammed straight into his gut, but Zac didn't try to dodge. He only took it head-on and was pushed back ten meters with a grunt.

But then, he flashed forward once again and returned a punch in kind. The attack created a huge shockwave, and it looked like the Zhix was blasted out of a cannon as they crashed into a large tree, turning it into splinters.

Zac didn't follow up and instead retrieved a large rug and the medallion Ibtep had also given him. Next, he took out a table and placed a large spit of grilled meat from the E-grade tiger on it and sat down as he looked over in the direction of the Anointed.

They looked like they had passed out from the punch and didn't move at all.

"What's going on?" Thea said with confusion after she walked over to Zac's side. "Didn't you say you would try diplomacy?"

"Well, the Zhix customs place a large focus on strength," Zac said as he noted that the Zhix started twitching.

Soon after, they arduously got to their feet and started walking toward Zac, who held up the medallion. The Anointed hesitated for a bit before they sat down on the opposite side of the table with a thump.

"You know the rites and have the tools, but you are no Anointed, human. What is going on?"

ALLIANCES

“I send greetings from Nonet of Hive Kundevis,” Zac said. “The Anointed heard of me attending this hunt and lent me these two treasures.”

“For what purpose?” the Anointed simply said.

“The Dominators,” Zac said, making the Anointed immediately tense up.

“What about them?”

“We believe them to be the largest threat to our survival, but we haven’t heard anything about them since our worlds merged. We seek both allies and information,” Zac explained.

“Why is Nonet not representing themselves for these matters? This is highly irregular, even if you were Zhix,” the Anointed said as they ripped off a large piece of the meat.

“Strength above all,” Zac simply said. “I am stronger than Nonet, much like I am stronger than most of the Anointed. I have earned the right to represent Hive Kundevis. My name is Zachary Atwood, and I am currently placed highest on the Power Ladder among us humans.”

The enormous Zhix leader gave a start when they realized who Zac was, and looked Zac over once again.

“It is true, strength above all. I am Herat, eighth Anointed of Hive Urbot. Almost getting knocked unconscious by the strongest is not a dishonor,” the large Zhix said, even looking a bit pleased. “What do you wish to know?”

“The Dominators such as Inevitability and Void’s Disciple are likely the strongest beings on our planets, yet us humans haven’t heard anything of them fighting the foreign invaders who threaten Zhix and humans alike,” Zac began. “We worry about what they are planning instead. They tried to enslave all Zhix before, from what I understand, and we believe they might

try something similar again.”

Herat slowly tapped a large finger on the table for a few seconds before they sighed, seemingly having come to a decision.

“They are gathering our kind,” the Anointed began. “Our ancestors died by the millions to stop their expansion thousands of years ago, but their sacrifice is becoming forgotten. One hive after another has aligned with the Dominators.”

“Why?” Zac couldn’t help asking with a frown.

“The corruption is everywhere. Both you and I reek of it, and that one behind you does as well. If all is corrupted, nothing is. This Cosmic Power enables us to evolve our hives and ascend. Some voices have started questioning our attempts to exterminate the Dominators back then, saying we shunned the gift of the universe,” Herat explained. “The lure of power is right in front of them, but the tales of enslavement are distant. They willingly follow to learn the secrets of power from the Dominators, in turn giving up their freedom,” Herat concluded with some hopelessness.

“What about the hives who don’t follow?” Zac asked.

“For now, we are being ignored, but we know that is just temporary. We worry just like you what they are planning, and steep ourselves in corruption to stand ready when the fight comes,” Herat said.

Zac frowned. He had held some small hope that the Dominators didn’t care about the state of the planet since they simply were more interested in cultivating. They had stayed their whole life on a planet with barely any Cosmic Energy at all, but now had almost endless resources to keep improving. That might make them forget about domination and instead focus on pushing toward D-grade and increased longevity.

But it was clear that they hadn’t changed their ways and were already starting to amass the Zhix, and it was understandable that some chose to follow them. Their core belief was centered around rooting out Corruption, but when everything was corrupted, they needed to make huge changes.

“I understand. My force and a few others are preparing for that battle as well. You understand them better than we do, and I think we should work together, just like how your hives banded together against the Dominators all that time ago,” Zac said.

“I cannot make that decision, human. Your strength is great, but you are still not Zhix. However, I will relay your message to the leaders of our war council. They will contact you about their decision,” the Zhix said as they got

to their feet. “Now I must hunt. Strength to your hive.”

“Wait, how will we get in contact?” Zac said with confusion. “If we ally right now, we will be able to stay in touch through the System.”

He lived on an isolated island, and he was afraid he’d lose contact with them if he let Herat go. It might end up the same as with Billyville, where they were technically allies but unable to contact each other until they met up in person again.

“I am just the Eighth Anointed. I cannot enter such a pact. A few of the High Anointed have miraculous means to communicate great distances, but if we cannot reach you, that is also fate,” Herat said as they lumbered away. “Do not worry; the Zhix always keep their word. Also, avoid the Dominators for now. You are strong, but they are stronger.”

Zac frowned at that last remark. This Herat wasn’t telling him everything, but then again, he didn’t expect them to. At least it seemed he had achieved one of his goals for now, which was to open up channels with the Zhix on the mainland.

As for these magical abilities, he could only hope they would work. Otherwise, he’d have to visit a hive personally in the future. He was hoping that he’d meet a few more powerful people during the hunt, setting up his private network, and if that worked out, it shouldn’t be too troublesome to find one of the larger hives.

“What are you planning?” Thea suddenly asked as she sat down in the same spot where Herat had sat before.

“After this hunt, I will start closing incursions in earnest,” Zac said. “I believe very few of them can match my power at the moment.”

Thea snorted at the somewhat boastful comment, but she didn’t contradict him. And what he said was true. Abby had already told him right at the beginning of the integration that one person snatching pretty much all the good titles in the start was pretty rare.

And from there, he had kept accumulating one advantage after another that put him far above what was expected of a newly integrated world. And with how strength worked, there was limited use of large numbers in trying to stop people such as himself, so unless the invaders had leaders who could match him, they were in trouble.

But then again, that simple fact worked the other way around as well. The existence of beings even stronger than any humans on Earth was a huge potential risk, since if Zac wasn’t able to handle them, perhaps no one could.

That was one reason he wanted to find the methods for the War Arrays the Medhin used, but he, unfortunately, couldn't find anything of the kind after rummaging through the possessions of Tyrbat.

"But I believe the Dominators are the real threat apart from the few top-tier incursions like the Undead Empire. I'm not sure you've met other Anointed apart from this one, but they are extremely strong, even without levels or titles."

"The Marshall Clan is situated somewhat close to a large hive. But we haven't made any headway with them. After a few intense battles, we have formed some sort of unspoken truce where we stay on our own land," Thea said. "But one of these giants never emerged during the battles."

"The Anointed are both their spiritual and actual leaders. I still don't know if they're another species or some equivalent of a queen ant, but they are far stronger than the normal ones," Zac said. "I am trying to forge an alliance with the Zhix to prepare ourselves for the clash with the Dominators. It doesn't seem they are content to stay hidden forever if they are amassing forces."

"Since we're on the subject, we should discuss a few other things," Thea said with some reluctance. "You've already spoken with my grandfather before about an alliance. It has already been formed, and we have been looking for you to join it."

"Oh?" Zac only said.

"Since you're planning on closing the incursions anyway, you should join us. Indeed, we do not possess your raw power, at the moment at least. But I believe you lack a proper support system for things such as information gathering and logistics," Thea pushed, obviously uncomfortable with presenting a sales pitch.

She had likely been urged by her grandpa to seek allies during the hunt, but Zac had learned during the past day she might be even more of an introvert than himself. His mouth slowly curved upward at seeing her forcing herself to advertise the alliance, and Thea immediately caught on to his glee.

She immediately closed her mouth and shot him a glare.

"What's so funny?" she spat.

"Nothing, nothing." Zac laughed as he sent her a prompt for becoming an ally, finally connecting Port Atwood and the Marshall Clan.

Since they had dealt with the Zhix, the two kept going toward their mountain, and the evening was pretty uneventful. One thing that was worth

noting was that Salvation was kicked from the top position after a couple of hours, the two Dominators once again passing him or her.

Salvation seemed to have gained a good boost that was somewhat unique to himself during the night, but he couldn't keep up with the carnage of the two E-grade monsters during the day. That hopefully proved that he wasn't as strong as Zac just yet.

Night soon came, and the two decided to stay by the foot of a mountain, hiding in a small courtyard of what had once been a disciple's cultivation cave. They vigilantly looked into the darkness, but this night, they didn't sense the insidious oppression from yesterday, which was a huge relief.

Around three a.m., they could pretty much confirm that the darkness wouldn't descend that night, and were finally able to somewhat relax. They still decided to stay for the night, though, and only resumed their journey in the morning.

It was only two days later that the darkness once again descended, its arrival proving that it wasn't a onetime thing. Zac and Thea were barely attacked this time, though their minds were still a bit scrambled by the penetrating wail that seemed to spread through the whole zone.

The trick of staying at the foot of the mountain was extremely effective, and it seemed that most people still around had learned their lesson, since only roughly 800 people left the trial during the night.

It was nothing compared to what had happened the day before. It was the arena battle. In just an hour, over four thousand names were removed from the ladder, meaning that there were quite a few who had tried to stay under the radar as they searched for treasure.

Neither Thea nor Zac were called, of course, since both had both battled and killed a fair amount since the start. Zac also breathed out in relief when he saw that Salvation didn't gain any levels this time, meaning that it might have been a onetime event that had happened during the last darkness.

The hunt was starting to become a routine as the two went from mountain to mountain, cleaning the summits of all their valuables. Thea had fully healed after three days thanks to the ginseng and her healing pills, but they chose to stay together both for safety and company.

There were a lot of things in Zac's pouch by now that he couldn't understand, but excluding these odd treasures, he estimated his gain to be well over a hundred million Nexus Coins. Thea's gain wasn't small either, and she was currently in the fourth position.

Zac himself lost the lead of the Gatherer Ladder after the second day, getting surpassed by Emperor Nenotheop. Thea had a theory that the emperor utilized his large army to gather treasure from multiple mountains simultaneously, and Zac wouldn't be surprised if that was the case.

The two could only redouble their efforts, sleeping only an hour every night. After a week of hunting, the frantic pace was starting to take its toll. However, something odd changed the normal flow of the hunt, as they saw a group of three humans and two Ishiate desperately fleeing down the mountain.

And right on their heels was what at first glance looked like very lifelike robots.

SILVER RIVERS

For a second, Zac imagined robots running rampant through the hunt, but he soon realized he wasn't looking at some advanced automatons. Instead, he noticed that those in pursuit might actually be humans who had painted themselves silver for some reason.

But something was extremely off about them. Their gazes were extremely lifeless, and they didn't show a single expression as they hounded the group in front. Zac looked over to Thea, who frowned as she observed the pursuit.

"Did you notice? Those silver people do not have ladder positions. I think they are corpses or puppets," Thea hesitantly said.

Zac's brows rose in surprise as he looked over at the metallic men again, and it was true. None of the silver humans had any ladder positions, meaning that they either weren't part of the hunt or were transformed dead. Zac wasn't sure whether he wanted to be involved with this strange event, but after a brief hesitation, he shook his head and flashed over with **[Loamwalker]**.

The next moment, he had caught one of the fleeing men, just like he had with so many others during the hunt. The Ishiate and other humans gawked when they saw Zac appear out of nowhere, but they didn't even stop for a fraction of a second. They just kept running as fast as their legs allowed, completely leaving their companion to his fate.

"Please let me go. They'll catch us. They are too strong!" the man desperately shouted while struggling to get free, and when he noticed Zac's arm was tougher than steel, he tried to take out his token.

However, Zac snatched the token from his captive with practiced ease before he took out **[Verun's Bite]**. A second later, a huge fractal edge sailed toward the silver cultivators, who now were less than a hundred meters away

from him.

There was still no sign of reaction from the silver cultivators, and their faces looked completely unperturbed by the incoming attack. But two of the pursuers jumped forward to block the fractal edge with their bodies. Zac could only snort when he saw their tactic, scoffing at the hubris of thinking only two people could stop his attack.

But the next moment, his brows rose in surprise.

The two guards actually self-detonated, and the explosion was barely enough to destroy Zac's fractal edge. Zac could only stupidly stare at the display, and he was now pretty sure that Thea was correct in her assertion that these things were dead. That two people would voluntarily use their bodies as fodder to stop an attack without a care in the world was pretty unlikely.

The others pushed through the cloud of dust that the explosion kicked up in the air, still trying to catch their prey. But it wasn't an even fight just because the silver cultivators had managed to intercept the first edge, and soon all the odd puppets were destroyed.

Strangely enough, they didn't leave any corpses when they died, but instead just turned into silver clouds that drifted up into the air. Zac was afraid it was some sort of last-ditch poison attack and stayed clear of the silver gases as they slowly dissipated.

However, his captive didn't seem relieved at all that Zac had made short work of the attackers, and still fearfully looked back up toward the summit. It was the same with the others in his party. None of them came back after Zac destroyed the silver puppets, and they were quickly running further and further away.

"Thank you, friend, but please let me go before their leader arrives with the real army. We must get as far away from this mountain as possible," the man said with his eyes fretfully looking up at the summit.

"Army? Is it one of the Medhin royals?" Zac asked. "Are they wearing golden robes?"

"No, it's not one of them. This is much worse! Please, we must flee before he turns us into puppets as well!"

Zac frowned and looked over at Thea, who shrugged in response. She hadn't heard of anyone like that either.

"Puppets? How many has he turned into puppets?" Zac asked.

"Hundreds and hundreds, perhaps a thousand. He has a whole army of

silver corpses like these ones,” the man hurriedly said as he gestured at the things Zac killed. “We barely got away since he was busy turning another group into puppets as well, but he was raving about turning everyone into Silver Guards.”

Zac had no reason to keep the man, and simply let him go after asking a few more questions. It truly didn't seem like it was a Medhin royal, but someone else. The captive only said that the leader looked like a hobo, but his army was insanely powerful. As for the army, the only thing in common was that they were all silver.

The moment the man was freed by Zac, he bolted so quickly that it almost looked like he would take flight. His mad dash was so frantic that he stumbled on a root after only fifty meters and slammed straight into the ground. But he apparently was so afraid that he didn't care about the blood flowing from his nose and only scrambled to his feet to keep running.

Zac frowned as he looked at the fleeing back of the man before turning back to Thea.

“What do you think?” Zac asked.

“Not sure. But it is clearly someone powerful, to have been able to capture hundreds of people. Hypnotist? Necromancer?” she guessed. “In any case, he should fight with numbers, which might make him similar to the Medhin royals.”

“Should we avoid him?”

“No,” Thea said resolutely. “He's turning humans into puppets, killing indiscriminately. He needs to be stopped.”

“Fine, let's go,” Zac said as he took out his axe as he looked up toward the summit.

He agreed with Thea's decision. Someone like this couldn't be left to their own devices. Besides, he'd already decided that he should improve his returns in this hunt by hunting the powerhouses, and now was as good a time to start as any. He didn't want to let the Medhin emperor get the best rewards from the hunt, and if this lunatic had found and killed almost a thousand people, he should be extremely rich as well by the sheer quantity of treasure.

The two didn't encounter any more parties as they ascended the mountain. Perhaps it meant that this leader up ahead was confident that the small squad of silver men would be able to capture their prey.

But that also raised the question of just how those things functioned. The man that Zac captured said that the silver puppets were dead, but they seemed

somewhat intelligent from how they responded to Zac's attack. One possibility was that the leader could control them remotely and even see what they saw through their eyes.

Zac guessed they would learn which was the case, depending on whether there was a trap waiting for them at the top of the mountain. Luckily, everything was calm when they reached the summit, and they slowly made their way forward until they found a hidden vantage behind some windswept bushes to scout the summit.

They could immediately confirm the man earlier had been telling the truth. There were almost a thousand of the silver corpses lined up in the square in front of the summit's palace. Furthermore, Zac realized that all kinds of people were represented among the army, increasing the likelihood that these were people who had been caught and turned into puppets.

There were humans from both worlds, judging by their attire, and there were also quite a few Ishiate and Zhix, though no Anointed stood among the silver ranks. Curiously enough, there were also a few extremely pale humanoids who reached roughly to Zac's chest.

His best guess was that these things were Ratmen or Molemen, going by their hunched-over posture and long tails, but they didn't exactly match the descriptions he'd heard from the Valkyries about their battles at the Ratmen incursion. They had more humanlike features, and they seemed to be completely hairless. The real Ratmen were essentially enormous bipedal rats.

It wasn't a species that Zac had ever heard of before, and he guessed these things were either from the other world or something local that lived in these mountains. But even these odd things weren't what truly drew Zac's attention. It was the supposed leader sitting in front of them on the ground with his eyes closed.

At first look, one might think that the man was a captive, going by how he looked. He was even worse than Zac's appearance back when he used a disgusting snakeskin for armor and was always caked in blood. It was to the point that Zac couldn't even make out the man's ethnicity or features, since he was just way too dirty, and the only reason Zac knew it was a man was that he had a large, grimy beard.

The man had black shoulder-length hair that was so oily, it looked wet, and the only thing he was dressed in was a large piece of cloth that Zac assumed might have been white once upon a time. However, Zac didn't relax when he saw the pathetic appearance of the leader but instead secured the

grip of his axe with a somber expression.

The man emitted a chaotic power that made Zac slightly apprehensive. The freely released aura around the hobo was clearly weaker than his own, but there was something very off about it, almost feeling like a sickness.

Zac also realized that there would be no option of a sneak attack, as the man soon opened his eyes and looked straight at the two of them in their hiding spot with a smile. There was undisguised insanity in his eyes, and Zac shuddered when he met the crazed gaze.

“Welcome, lost lambs,” the man said, slowly getting up on his feet. “I saw you stop my Silver Guards. Are you here to make amends by joining the unity?”

“Who are you, and what have you done with all these people?” Zac asked as he left his hiding spot and walked into the large square on the summit, Thea soon following behind him.

“I am Salvation, prophet of the Great Redeemer,” the man proclaimed with a grand voice, the madness in his eyes burning even brighter. “These ones have been freed from the curse of sapience and have joined the eternal unity.”

“So you are Salvation,” Zac said and, without another word, unleashed a fractal edge straight at the man, hoping to cut the head off the snake.

However, a hundred of the silver people behind him wordlessly slapped their hands together, and an extremely thick shield appeared in front of their leader, effortlessly stopping his attack.

“Oh, you are quite powerful,” the grimy man said while looking at Zac with a burning gaze. “Has the Great Redeemer provided me with the first Golden Guard?”

Zac didn't comment on Salvation's rambling and instead spoke to Thea with a low voice, without taking his eye off his target.

“I'll clash head-on. See if you can find any opportunities from the flank.”

Thea nodded and actually disappeared by turning translucent. It was the first time Zac had seen her use this skill, and he had to admit it suited her and her weapon quite well. But there was no time for admiration, as part of the army suddenly stretched their hands into the air like they were trying to grasp something above them.

The next moment, they literally melted into a silver river that started floating around Salvation, making his robes flutter in the wind. The liquid metal that the soldiers turned into emitted the chaotic energies that he sensed

from Salvation himself, though it was even stronger.

“Those cursed by their clamoring souls are always led astray. But all will be brought into the fold,” Salvation said as he pointed at Zac, and part of the silver river shot toward him with shocking speed, transforming into a huge lance heading straight toward him.

Zac summoned another fractal edge with **[Chop]** and swung it head-on to meet the incoming attack. But the moment the two forces clashed, Zac’s brows rose in alarm from the pure force contained in Salvation’s silver lance.

The power pushed Zac back over fifty meters, and the shockwave from the clash caused widespread destruction of the square on the summit. Zac’s hands were even shaking from the strain of holding the attack at bay, but it was also clear that there was a limit to the power of the river.

Zac noted that the river had shrunk by around 10% after the clash, with some silver steam dissipating into the air just like when he’d destroyed the puppets at the foot of the mountain. But the next moment, the river was reinforced by more silver men liquefying and joining the river.

From there on, Zac didn’t have much time to analyze the situation as the silver river was trying to attack him from all angles like a rabid beast.

DESCENT

Zac furiously defended with both his axe and his swirling leaves against the onslaught that came at him from all angles. It was as though he was caught in the middle of an agitated hornet swarm where a thousand attacks kept angling for him.

Wounds started to accumulate over his body, and he was spending Cosmic Energy at a tremendous pace. However, the furious defense wasn't for nothing, as a thick mist was rising above him from the expended silver river.

After having fought a bit, Zac started to get a decent idea of what was going on. Salvation turned people into these silver things and then used the stored energy inside their bodies to launch extremely powerful attacks.

However, each attack depleted Salvation's storage of soldiers, as the attack spent the stored energy and the corpses dissipated. Zac estimated that a couple of Silver Guards were destroyed by each and every clash, judging by how much the silver river shrank afterward.

In just a short bout, Zac had destroyed at least fifty corpses, and he felt a bit nauseated at the thought of destroying innocent people. It was an extremely wicked method to fight, and Zac wondered just what kind of evil Salvation had committed to gain access to a class that could do something this messed up.

"Despicable," Zac growled at Salvation, who controlled the silver liquid from the distance.

"All crusades require sacrifice for the greater good. They will forever stay part of the Cosmos, all overseen by the Great Redeemer," Salvation said with a calm smile, no remorse or guilt on his face at all.

Zac realized there was no point to keep talking with this madman, and tried to decide on a plan. The thought of destroying people every time he clashed with Salvation was revolting, and he wasn't sure that his endurance would last through destroying the whole army in any case.

A better method would be to bring the fight to Salvation himself. **[Inquisitive Eye]** didn't work on the man, but Zac felt his attributes should be more aligned with a mage, judging by how he fought. That meant high Intelligence but low Endurance.

Killing him directly would be more efficient than grinding down the army of silver corpses, and it would also feel a lot better. Perhaps there was even a way to save these poor people and turn them back. The ground cracked under his legs as Zac used **[Loamwalker]** the moment he saw an opening in the silver river swirling around him, and he flashed toward Salvation. But he was ready for the assault, simply putting his hands in a praying position.

"Sanctuary," Salvation said, and the next moment, he was completely enclosed in the silver liquid, creating a huge ball five meters across.

Zac wouldn't stop from just that, though, and with a determined face, summoned a five-meter fractal edge and imbued it with the Dao of Sharpness. The last clashes, he hadn't utilized any Dao, and the difference it made was clear as he cut through the ball like butter.

However, Salvation was nowhere to be seen inside the ball, until he suddenly appeared behind Zac, reaching for his head. Alarm bells went off in Zac's mind, telling him he would die if Salvation reached him. He desperately pushed away while simultaneously trying to cut off Salvation's arm.

At the same moment, a huge whirlwind erupted in the middle of the silver army, where Thea suddenly appeared. Everything within fifty meters of her was shredded into ribbons, and over a hundred silver corpses dissipated in an instant.

However, she wasn't done there and immediately moved toward a thick group of guards to keep whittling down the defenses. While Zac had felt a bit hesitant about this tactic, she clearly had no such compunctions.

For the first time since the start of the battle, Salvation's calm face changed, turning into one of unbridled rage.

"Apostasy!" he screamed as he pointed at Thea.

The next moment, another hundred silver corpses liquefied and turned into a hundred swords that all tried to stab Thea, who had to use all of her

agility to escape the encirclement unscathed. Her plan to keep destroying corpses had to be abandoned since she was busy just dodging the innumerable blades gunning for her life.

It was clear that Thea had found a solution to reduce the power of Salvation. It was starting to become more and more apparent that Salvation was needed to control these things. She had been able to destroy a tenth of the army without any resistance due to Salvation being preoccupied with his battle with Zac.

It was far more efficient than trying to destroy the silver river, as it was clearly more resilient when it was actively controlled by Salvation. Perhaps he infused some of his own Cosmic Energy into the metallic liquid that floated about in the air, whereas the silver soldiers were just energy on standby.

Zac could only grit his teeth and follow the same plan as Thea, even though he felt it was a bit distasteful. But the man was simply too elusive. It looked like he could somehow freely move within the silver liquid, making it nigh impossible to strike him down.

He immediately summoned five huge fractal edges as he frantically dodged or bore the damage from the innumerable attacks from the silver rivers all around him. But he didn't use them to harass Salvation, who had emerged from his protective bubble.

Instead, Zac shot them at various clumps of Silver Guards who were still just mutely standing in the distance, and each blade was imbued with the Dao of Sharpness. His goal was to continue Thea's work while she was keeping the hundred silver swords busy.

The next moment, Zac heedlessly charged Salvation, hoping to occupy his attention.

A storm of lightning-quick swings blanketed Salvation, who had to desperately create barrier after barrier of silver shields to protect himself from Zac's onslaught. The silver river around him was shrinking at a noticeable pace from Zac's frenzied swings, with each Dao-infused strike destroying a noticeable part of it.

It looked like his plan might actually work, as the Silver Guards were still standing completely immobile, not making any attempts to defend against the incoming blades. But it appeared that Salvation wouldn't take it lying down, as his eyes lit up with an almost blinding light, and the chaotic aura inside him increased manifold.

“DESCENT!” Salvation roared, and before the fractal edges could reach the army, over six hundred silver corpses liquefied, causing a silver storm that covered the whole summit and rose fifty meters into the air.

The swords that were harassing Thea also stopped their chase and instead joined the other energies to infuse the storm with even more power. Zac immediately got an extremely bad feeling as he sensed the rampant energies that were gathering in the air, and he tried to quickly kill off Salvation before it got any worse.

He even activated [**Hatchetman’s Rage**] while he started gathering energy for his ultimate strike, [**Nature’s Punishment**]. But Salvation was suddenly swallowed by the silver storm, and Zac had no chance to unleash his ultimate attack since he was unable to locate his real form any longer.

The danger sense in Zac’s mind was going haywire, and Zac heedlessly flooded the fractal in his arm with Cosmic Energy while he looked up at what was happening. The silver storm had created a huge cloud up in the air, and something nefarious was brewing inside.

Suddenly, two enormous eyes that seemed to want to judge the world opened from within the silver clouds. They held the same silver luster that Salvation’s eyes had shone with before he disappeared, but Zac didn’t feel that the huge eyes were an avatar of Salvation.

Salvation’s eyes shone with madness, but the huge globes up in the sky looked down at the mountain peak like a god staring down at a pitiful ant. There was a boundless arrogance and disdain within them as well, but Zac wasn’t sure if it was an actual person, since the eyes were completely unmoving and unblinking.

The pressure from just the gaze was enormous, and the next moment, a gigantic face emerged from the cloud, increasing the pressure even further. The face was at least fifty meters across, a huge monstrosity that covered most of Zac’s field of vision.

The face was of a young human man, and not someone Zac recognized. His face was extremely handsome, apart from the condescending eyes. There was also an extremely intricate fractal in his forehead that radiated immense power, and just by looking at it, Zac felt like his soul was going to get sucked out of his body.

The face didn’t stay up in the clouds, but soon it started to descend toward the summit at a measured pace. Zac’s brows rose in alarm as he looked over at a pale-faced Thea, who stood some distance away.

“Get away from the summit. I can handle this,” he shouted as he kept infusing his arm with Cosmic Energy.

The pressure upon Zac was mounting as the enormous face descended, and his instincts told him to get down on his knees in subservience. But he ignored those voices as he gritted his teeth while he pushed his right hand upward. The space above him cracked, and the familiar enormous hand rose to meet the incoming face.

The Wrath of God clashed with **[Nature’s Punishment]**, and the two forces meeting caused such a shockwave that the barrier protecting the palace was completely destroyed, and the shockwaves caused the palace to rip to shreds as it was pushed down the mountain.

Zac felt as though his whole body was breaking apart from the collision, but he staunchly kept pushing forward while allocating some energy to summon **[Nature’s Barrier]** to blanket him from at least some of the errant energies that were ripping the whole summit apart.

The hand was barely five meters across, and it almost looked like a child who was trying to push away an adult as it pressed on the enormous fractal that adorned the forehead of the enormous head.

However, inside that seemingly small hand, a boundless force was contained. It possessed everything Zac was able to utilize, from his Dao of Trees to the infusion of **[Hatchetman’s Rage]**; its power was unmatched even by what most E-grade evolved could muster.

For a few seconds, the two forces were at an impasse, with neither face nor hand giving in, but soon a jarring crack echoed across the mountain. A large scar could suddenly be seen across the fractal on the huge head as the fingers from the wooden hand dug inside the forehead.

The moment the fractal cracked, it was as though the force that held the hundreds of silver corpses together came undone. The head started to ooze torrential amounts of silver clouds, and it almost looked as though it was burning from the enormous plume that was rising from it.

Normally, Zac would have deactivated the hand by now, but he staunchly kept feeding the hand with everything he possessed, even his life force. He wouldn’t relent until the face was completely destroyed so that he could crush Salvation.

Zac wasn’t the only one who was running out of energy, as the face was almost translucent by now with silver clouds spreading far enough to even reach the neighboring mountains. Finally, the head cracked into innumerable

pieces, the last energies coming undone.

A mangled body fell down from the skies with a wail and caused a large crater when he slammed into the ground on the other side of the summit. But Zac knew he was alive, as some remaining droplets of the liquid river blanketed the fall at the last moment. Zac's whole body felt like it was on fire, but he wouldn't let this opportunity go.

He was already out of Cosmic Energy, but he squeezed his body to activate **[Loamwalker]** once more, speeding toward the mangled body of Salvation. But he frowned when he saw Salvation crush his token with a shaking hand. Still, all was not lost since there was still a window of opportunity to kill this raving lunatic before he was sent away.

They had already confirmed that the power of someone dictated how long the delay was before they were sent back, and someone like Salvation should take at least ten seconds. He couldn't let this man get back to the Cradle of God. Who knew how many Silver Guards he had there to empower himself.

He immediately moved to close the last distance, his axe already falling down with finality.

"Lord Redeemer, please save me!" he shouted in desperation, and in the next moment, a man actually appeared next to him.

Zac first planned to ignore him to strike the finishing blow, but a terrifying aura suddenly exploded out from the man, eclipsing anything Zac had ever felt before.

Every cell in his body told him that if he moved just one step closer, he would die without a doubt, and he unhesitatingly stopped his assault as he jumped back a few steps. Zac couldn't help looking over at the figure silently standing next to the crater with Salvation still inside.

And the man who looked back at him was none other than the owner of the face in the clouds.

THE GREAT REDEEMER

The man standing next to the crater was clearly the same as the one in the sky earlier, though there were some minute differences. The normal-sized one felt more lifelike, whereas the huge avatar that tried to crush the whole summit might as well have been a mask or statue.

The mysterious man briefly scrutinized the surroundings until his eyes met Zac's. It was as though a lightning bolt went through Zac's mind when he met the stare, and it truly felt like he would perish if he held eye contact.

He quickly looked away, and thoughts of fleeing were quickly filling his mind. But something stopped him. The aura this man emitted was on the same tier as that of Greatest, and if he truly was here, there was nothing he could do. His life and death weren't in his hands any longer.

But at the same time, they were in an enclosed space for a System-organized treasure hunt. He didn't believe people even of that level of power would be able to break into a place like this. The rules of a System-sanctioned Mystic Realm were inviolable.

If there were attribute or grade limiters in place, then there was nothing that could be done. Not even supreme old monsters could break in as far as Zac understood. That meant that the man in front of him might just be a powerless illusion and that the towering aura was just empty blustering. That would also explain why he only stood there. Zac tightened the grip on his axe with determination.

A huge fractal edge fell straight toward Salvation, who fearfully looked up at the edge as he hastily gathered the last remnants of his silver energies to produce a feeble defense. But Zac knew that small defense wouldn't stop his assault, as his attack was powered by the Dao of Sharpness and his very life

force.

But the mysterious man simply pointed a finger at the incoming attack, and it felt as though all life was drained out of his body as the fractal edge disintegrated from some unseen force.

“Insolence,” the man said with a melodic voice, and Zac coughed up blood as he fell back, unable to stand up again.

“It’s true. I am not here in person. I am just an imprint. But my very existence is enough to ward off some baby cultivators,” the man continued as he looked down at Zac with disdain in his eyes.

It was clear, though, that the man was not truly there, since whatever the man did to stop Zac’s approach had drained the imprint enough to make him transparent. Zac knew that he would perhaps only be able to stop one more attack, but his body wouldn’t listen when he tried to command it to move.

“Are you my inheritor? Disappointing. This is my only intervention.” The man sighed as he looked down at the crumpled form of Salvation, but the next moment, he looked over at the space on the opposite side of the crater.

He didn’t say anything, only disdainfully snorted, but immediately after, a pale-faced Thea emerged from nowhere, coughing out blood, a slender sword in her hand. It looked like she had tried to assassinate Salvation unseen, but she couldn’t escape the gaze of Salvation’s protector.

“This unworthy one thanks you, Great Lord!” Salvation feebly coughed as he grasped his Cosmos Sack in his hand. “I will continue your bidding.”

The next moment, he started fading away, but Zac was unwilling to give in to the imprint. He summoned strength he didn’t know he had, and with a roar, threw **[Verun’s Bite]** at Salvation. He had no energy left to summon any skill, and could only pin his hopes on non-magical means.

Unfortunately, Zac was completely spent, and his aim was slightly off. The axe had quite a bit of force as it hurtled toward Salvation, but it was flying too low to hit anything lethal. But it was still a throw from someone possessing over 300 Strength, and Salvation desperately swirled to avoid the incoming edge.

A muffled groan escaped Salvation’s mouth as the axe tore through the man’s wrist and cut off his right hand along with the Cosmos Sack, which fell down on the ground. Zac could only shake his head in disappointment, and the next moment, Salvation winked out of existence.

The last thing Zac saw of Salvation was two eyes that burned with madness and vengeance. The pouch that had just fallen turned into motes of

light and flew into Zac's Cosmos Sack.

The whole thing had happened in an instant, and the Redeemer was unable or unwilling to lend any further assistance to Salvation, and he instead only gazed up into the sky with some anticipation on his face. Zac knew the imprint was running out of time and hoped to gain at least some information before it disappeared.

"Who are you? Are you from the Church of Everlasting Dao?" Zac coughed.

Zac's words brought back the attention of the quickly fading form.

"I am not one of those filthy body peddlers. Their path toward immortality is a dead end, an empty pit of despair. I sense that my true body is still alive, which means that eons of planning are soon coming to fruition. We will meet again, little defier," he said with a small smile as he finally was reduced to just motes of light.

Zac didn't dare move for a few seconds, even after the man disappeared, but soon he arduously tried to get over to Thea. His vision was swimming, but he knew they couldn't stay here. His body was completely spent, and he was lying down helplessly on the ground. It was Thea instead who got up to her feet, fearfully looking over at the spot where the man once stood as she walked over to Zac.

"Who the hell was that?" she muttered, perhaps to herself or perhaps as a question to Zac.

"Definitely not someone from Earth," Zac said with a frown. "He was at least a D-grade powerhouse, possibly even higher."

"I've read that powerful people can imprint treasures with their very essence. Salvation must have somehow gotten his hands on such a treasure. But I don't understand how. It's extremely taxing to make such an imprint because you need to cut off a piece of your soul to leave the imprint. It's rarely done," Thea explained.

"They are usually only awarded to direct disciples and are extremely rare treasures. It's not something the System awards either," she continued.

"Salvation kept talking about some Great Redeemer," Zac said, trying to keep his scattered mind focused. "Perhaps that was him. He might have gotten his hands on an inheritance or something. That kind of treasure sounds like something that might be left to an inheritor."

"That's impossible. This is a new world; there are no inheritances here," Thea said with a shake of her head.

Zac scratched his face for a couple of seconds before he coughed.

“Well, it’s not completely impossible. I have a couple of them as well, got them as a reward,” he explained, his voice getting lower and lower as the intensity from Thea’s glare increased. “And more importantly, that man called Salvation his inheritor.”

She didn’t say anything, only gave an annoyed huff as she surveyed the area before pulling Zac to his feet.

“I think we need to go,” she said. “The palace is destroyed, and people from all surrounding mountains should have seen the battle. None of us is in any condition to fight another battle.”

Zac was about to agree, but suddenly, his vision turned slanted. It took a bit for his muddled mind to realize that he had fallen over, which made him finally realize just how bad his condition was. That last strike had used up most of his remaining life force, and when it was destroyed, it got even worse.

“Don’t put my body into a Cosmos Sack,” was all that Zac could say before his vision turned black.

An unknown amount of time later, Zac woke up with a cough, his eyes straining to adjust as he slowly opened them. He saw that he had been moved after all, as he was inside what looked to be the ruins of some of the structures closer to the foot of a mountain.

However, he realized that his fears had been true, as his vision had once again turned into that of his Draugr form. His feeling only worsened when he realized that he was tied up to the point that he was barely able to move, and the bindings were actually strong enough to keep him secured.

“So you’re up,” Thea’s voice sounded from behind him, but Zac wasn’t even able to turn over.

“Thanks for carrying me away. So, uh, why have you tied me up?” Zac asked, trying to make his voice sound as warm and alive as possible.

There was no response for a few seconds until a light shuffle could be heard as Thea entered his field of vision. She looked to be mostly fine, apart from being slightly pale, but she had a frown on her face as she scrutinized Zac from some distance.

Zac knew very well just how different he looked in this current form, particularly his pitch-black eyes that looked like portals to the abyss.

“I am not an undead. I am still Zac,” Zac said.

“You sure look like an undead, and you’re deathly cold to the touch,” she said with an unconvinced face.

“Well, it’s a long story, but through a few deadly encounters, I found a way to get two lives. I can somewhat freely swap between my two forms, but sometimes the change is forced upon me,” Zac said.

“Like dying,” Thea said with a blank face.

“Well, yes, that would do the trick.” Zac coughed.

“So you are immortal?” she probed.

“I don’t think so?” Zac hesitantly said. “It’s not like I’d survive getting my head cut off.”

The moment the words left his mouth, he regretted it, as Thea’s eyes thinned as she pointedly stared at his exposed throat. However, nothing happened as the seconds passed, and Zac could finally breathe easy again.

But Thea eventually spoke up again, and he couldn’t help but get a bit antsy from her stare.

“You should understand my position. It is already clear that Salvation is under the thumb of some alien influence, bringing a great threat to Earth. Now I find out that the top Ranker is an undead when there’s an undead incursion on Earth that has ravaged a good deal of Asia,” she said with an even stare.

“What you said might be true, but I need to ask some questions to ascertain the veracity of your claim,” she continued.

From there on, she kept asking him various questions that only he would know, such as the content of their explorations during the hunt, or their shared experiences at the auction earlier. However, after a while, the nature of the questions started to change.

“How old were you when you stopped wetting the bed?” she suddenly asked.

“What? No idea, three perhaps?” Zac answered with a perplexed face.

“How many girlfriends do you have, and how do you rank them?” she continued without missing a beat.

“Rank them? What are you talking about? I am single,” Zac answered with an exasperated voice.

“That’s not what our intelligence indicates,” Thea retorted.

“Are you talking about Hannah? We broke up some time ago,” Zac said but frowned when he saw her mouth quirking slightly upward. “Wait, are you messing with me?”

The next moment, the ropes around him were released, and he was free again. However, he shot a glare at Thea, who innocuously looked back at him as he stretched his sore body.

“We need to get going. We’re still somewhat close to the scene of the battle,” Thea said without commenting about the earlier line of questioning.

Zac only snorted, but he was quick to follow behind her. He sensed that his core wasn’t filled at the moment, making it a risky venture to turn back again. Instead, he simply donned a cloak that covered his head and would hide his identity until he could turn back again.

The two kept moving as soon as Zac was freed by Thea since they were still pretty close to the scene of the battle. They weren’t worried about the average cultivators, but rather the top names on the ladders, such as the Dominators and the Medhin emperor.

Their battle with Salvation might as well have been a blaring sign showing half the mountainous region where top powerhouses were, and if the E-grade evolved had done any sort of reconnaissance, they should know that there were only three E-grade trial-takers present at the hunt.

However, it didn’t mean they stopped their treasure hunt just because they wanted to avoid any further battle for the time being. However, they decided to avoid the top-tier palaces in favor of looting the high-tier sites that were not quite as conspicuous.

But they soon learned that the competition for these mountains was much harsher compared to the top-tier ones that were guarded by extremely powerful arrays. Two out of the three mountains they visited during the day had already been looted, and it was only thanks to Thea’s observation skills that they managed to find any treasures at all.

She had managed to at least find a few hidden stashes that contained decent returns, but it was far worse than the usual haul they had during the day. Thea had already lost two positions, but Zac had soared up to the first position on the Gatherer Ladder, thanks to looting Salvation.

OUT OF THE FRYING PAN

Zac started absorbing energy for his core the moment that they settled in for the night, holding a Divine Crystal in one hand and a Miasma Crystal in the other. As soon as the core was filled up, he began the process of turning back to a human again.

Since he had already turned, he first thought about staying that way for a while. He could take the opportunity to both gain a couple of levels and work on his quests. However, in the end, he decided against it, which was why he was currently emptying himself of Miasma from all his pores.

There were a few reasons for this. The most important was the safety issue. There were dangers both known and unknown prowling the mountains, and his combat prowess was far higher in his human form. Perhaps that would change in the future, but for now, it was safer to have access to his Hatchetman class. He only had one skill at the moment, and Zac believed that the best use for **[Deathwish]** was to handle large groups of weaker enemies.

Secondly, there was the issue of Thea. He had already explained that he had gained the ability to gain a second life by turning to an undead, but he never mentioned anything about a second class. He was therefore a bit leery about grinding his class while traveling with her.

She had proven herself to be a solid ally through thick and thin during the hunt, but he had also realized that family was extremely important to her, even if she was a bit of a loner. If he for some reason became at odds against the Marshall Clan, she would stand with them, and he was unwilling to show all his cards at this juncture. He knew he'd already slipped up a couple of times by now, but he could only channel his inner Ogras and strive to do better from now on.

A cloud of Miasma was slowly gathering above Zac as he expelled everything in his body until his vision once again began swimming, and he lost consciousness. When he woke up again, he was relieved to find that he wasn't bound like the last time, but Thea was still sitting close by, observing him.

"Pretty impressive," she commented when she noticed that Zac was back to being a bona fide human. "Are you able to turn into anything else as well?"

"I'm not some shape-shifter," Zac muttered as he cracked his neck.

He truly needed to find a better method for the change. Having to die just to turn was a huge pain in the ass, and it felt extremely uncomfortable as well. Every cell in his body screamed for sustenance, but he had to repress those basic impulses and let his body slowly get drained.

"So what's next?" Thea said as she started setting up her tent.

They were inside a small house at the foot of a mountain, but she still chose to erect her one-man tent. She had done the same every night since they'd started traveling together, and Zac guessed she wanted some privacy as she slept. He knew it wasn't an issue of not wanting to get dirtied by the floor beneath since he'd seen her caked in both blood and grime during the last days without so much as lifting an eyebrow.

"Nothing's really changed. We should start hitting the top-tier palaces again if you're up for it," Zac said after mulling it over for a bit.

Thea nodded before she got into her tent, leaving Zac to take the first watch.

Zac sat down next to the doorway of the structure as he looked out into the darkness. The darkness this night didn't seem very oppressive, and he could spot the weak stars in the sky, meaning that there probably wouldn't be a nightly assault this day.

Since he had some time to spare, he decided to go over his gains from the past day, and first opened his status screen.

Name: Zachary Atwood

Level: 62

Class: [F-Rare] Hatchetman

Race: [E] Human

Alignment: [Earth] Port Atwood – Lord

Titles: Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen
Dao: Seed of Heaviness – Middle, Seed of Trees – High, Seed of Sharpness – Early
Core: [F] Duplicity

Strength: 370 [Increase: 55%. Efficiency: 116%]
Dexterity: 221 [Increase: 40%. Efficiency: 116%]
Endurance: 375 [Increase: 66%. Efficiency: 116%]
Vitality: 239 [Increase: 56%. Efficiency: 116%]
Intelligence: 90 [Increase: 40%. Efficiency: 116%]
Wisdom: 85 [Increase: 40%. Efficiency: 116%]
Luck: 93 [Increase 60%. Efficiency: 116%]

Free Points: 1
Nexus Coins: [F] 26,743,653

The day's activities had slightly improved his attributes once again, with him gaining a level in his undead form from killing beasts when they changed mountains. He looked at his free point for a bit before he put it into Strength.

He had gone back and forth on this; eventually, he chose to increase his Strength. With the help of the Dao of Sharpness, he actually had far more Dexterity than he needed to keep a decent ratio. He felt that he could afford a couple more points into Strength since it was still his main attribute during fights.

Another idea he had was to boost his Wisdom and Intelligence to 100 each before he got ready to evolve, in case any future Class Upgrade had restrictions on either of those attributes or that there was a minimum of 100 in all attributes.

But he felt that putting points there was a bit premature. He was leaning toward instant power-ups during this hunt rather than something that could benefit him down the line. Besides, it wasn't impossible he'd gain some more

attributes through new titles or treasures before he reached level 75. The fewer points he needed to put himself into those attributes, the better.

Another welcome surprise was that **[Nature's Punishment]** and **[Nature's Barrier]** both had evolved from the last battle. He hadn't noticed until now since he had been in his undead form during the whole day.

That Nature's Punishment had upgraded was the most critical. It had been his final card in every tough fight since he'd gained the skill, and the power of the wooden hand essentially dictated how strong enemies he could defeat.

He had no idea just what kind of effect the upgraded skill would have, since there were no clues, but he sensed that the fractal on his forearm could take in far more energy compared to before, which could only be seen as a good sign.

Each point in attribute also increased the amount of Cosmic Energy he could hold, meaning that he had far more to go around today compared to when he first gained the skill. At that time, using the skill just once took pretty much all his energy, but by now, he used less than half his energy to launch it.

As for **[Nature's Barrier]**, he simply summoned the swirling leaves after throwing a glance at the tent at the opposite side of the building. The continuous consumption of his defensive skill was higher since the upgrade. But the leaves were also far more resplendent, almost lighting up the building with their green luster.

He also saw that the veins on the leaves had changed a bit. They'd slightly looked like fractals before as well, but they were much clearer now. He still couldn't make anything out from the fractals due to his lacking insight into that field, but he knew that each leaf could block far more force compared to before.

Satisfied with the result, he deactivated the skill, his eyes turning to his Cosmos Sack next.

He hadn't properly gone through it since they had been on the move the whole day, but now there was time to properly look it over. He had briefly peeked into it during the day, and he was shocked by the number of things inside since he'd looted Salvation.

There was no way he would be able to store everything inside if he had only his own sacks, as the sheer quantity of items was just enormous. If he decided to empty the sack, he would be able to create a small hill of healing pills alone, for example, and there were thousands and thousands of weapons.

Salvation had been at the eighth place on the Gatherer Ladder when he fled the hunt, but his way of getting that high up had been vastly different from himself and Thea. The two of them had only hit top palaces, occasionally lining their pockets with the possessions of other trial takers while traveling between the summits.

Salvation had simply killed and robbed almost a thousand people as a way to increase his Silver Guard, and it was obvious that he'd kept everything they owned as well. But it was also clear that most of the guards were of pretty low power on average, as the quality of the loot was pretty lackluster. Zac sat and went through item after item, but he only found a total of six items that seemed valuable.

He placed them together with the twenty-two other items he had looted during the hunt, the first of them being the extremely heavy metal ball that was covered in intricate fractals. His plan for them was simply to hand them over to Calrin when he got back for identification and potentially selling off.

Some of them might be a good weapon against the Dominators or the Medhin emperor, but he was just unable to figure anything out about their method of usage. He'd rather just stash them than accidentally blow himself up. As for the mountain of other treasures, they were just low-value items that would fill his contribution system back in Port Atwood. Things such as healing and fasting pills were always in high demand.

The night passed uneventfully, and the two set out at the break of dawn. They once again settled into their usual routine, and the following days, they hit one high-value target after another. However, on the second day, something odd happened.

In the distance, the mountains were simply replaced with the blackness of space, and the once endless field of view got abruptly cut short. It came suddenly and without warning and made Zac and Thea stop in their tracks.

"It's a battle royale," Zac suddenly muttered as he looked at the newly erected wall.

"A what?" Thea asked with confusion.

"I think the System is reducing the size of the hunt, and it might keep shrinking it over time. We're pretty spread out at the moment, and we haven't really fought anyone in two days. The System wants more struggle, and it's forcing us into closer proximity," Zac said.

"Figures," Thea only commented with a sigh.

"Well, there's still quite a huge field to search. Even if we walked in a

straight line, it would take us over a month to pass the whole thing. But I think we should maintain a large distance from the black wall; the System might not give a warning if it decides to reduce the area again,” Zac added as he started looking for a new target.

Zac was proven right three days later, as the black wall swallowed up a large group of mountains again. And if the System was looking for more fights, the plan worked spectacularly. Both Zac and Thea had been forced to kill a bunch of cultivators each during the past days.

Furthermore, the valleys were flooded with innumerable beasts that seemed to have been pushed out of the black enclosure. It had gotten to the point that he'd even seen a pack of huge rats getting pushed down the large cracks in the ground that ran alongside the mountains due to overcrowding.

There were also constant sounds of battles from the various mountains, and the impacts they caused were getting larger as well, as most of the weaker people were quickly getting rooted out. In just three days, over ten thousand had been eliminated from the hunt either through leaving voluntarily or getting killed, which was a way faster pace than before.

Zac and Thea were mostly unaccosted by this, though. There were very few who could threaten them at the moment, and there were usually very few people on the mountains they chose. They only picked the summits with the most spectacular palaces that would have the harshest arrays protecting them.

They'd had a few close calls during the past days, particularly in a palace that had an extremely insidious mix of arrays. Initially, they had just thought it was a combination of a battle array that spawned a bunch of golems and a gravity array, but they were wrong.

There had also been an imperceptible illusion array that only slightly messed with their senses, and Zac only found out when his danger sense blared to life. However, it was too late, and he was gored by a sharp spike by one of the golems. Thankfully, the warning had allowed him to avoid any lethal damage, and the immense pain helped him break out of the array.

However, the two had generally had smooth sailing so far. But something was different about the mountain in front of them, making Zac stop in his tracks with a frown. They were just standing at the foot, as they had with so many other mountains.

But this time, his Luck was in no uncertain terms telling him that he was in danger.

ROOTING OUT PROBLEMS

“This had better work,” Ogras grunted in annoyance. “This goddamn array almost cleaned me out.”

“Well, it was you who decided to buy through the Mercantile System rather than wait for Lord Atwood to return,” Calrin responded, not able to hide his glee.

In front of them was a huge table wrought from some crystal, and its surface was covered in dense fractals. Oddly enough, each of the legs had sharpened ends, and all four of them were currently embedded into the ground. They were in a secluded cave right in the middle of the island, and this place had also become the headquarters of their operation.

Ogras only glared at the little twerp for a bit, thinking of methods he could have revenge without getting caught. He just knew that the little shit had added a substantial premium to the tools required when he saw the hurry that Ogras was in. But he could only swallow his ire for now, and he instead took out a crystal from his sleeve and put it to his mouth.

“Are you ready?” Ogras asked into the crystal.

“Ready,” a sullen voice responded from the other side.

“Come now, don’t be like that. I’m sure that Zac will warm up if he heard you protected his sister.” Ogras snorted.

Alea had been a complete drag the past weeks, drifting about like a brooding ghost. That man kept throwing annoying problems at him just to go on exciting adventures. Now Ogras was supposed to be some sort of marriage counselor as well? Well, at least he would get an adventure of his own if this all worked out, and he could leave all this crap behind.

The plan had taken a week of intense research and another week of

putting everything together. The whole island now had over fifty minor teleportation arrays hidden all over. He would be able to appear almost anywhere on the island at a moment's notice; they only needed to start up the main array in front of them to start the operation.

He had racked his brain for days to come up with another way to spot the shape-shifters. Those bastards were the only thing that blocked him from being able to enter the Mystic Realm now, and he couldn't wait to rip them apart. Ogras had even bought over twenty information missives from Calrin until he finally found a plan that had a decent chance to work.

Thoughts of just sneaking inside the Mystic Realm had crossed his mind tens of times, but in the end, he forcibly pushed down those impulses. If Zac found out he'd shirked his duties while he was away, he could forget about getting his hand on the inheritance, which was a surefire power-up for him compared to the unknown of the Mystic Realm.

Besides, he knew who would be the main target of an assassination if both he and Zac were gone from the island simultaneously, and he didn't want to see Zac's sister get herself killed. He had spent most of his time shadowing MacKenzie Atwood since Zac left on the hunt, and he had to admit she was an interesting person.

She was contradiction personified. He had never met someone with such precise control of Cosmic Energy; her precision and reaction time were unparalleled. With such god-given talents, she would be welcomed as an elite in almost any sect.

Attributes could be solved by various means, but supreme talent was far harder to come by. But at the same time, he had seen her fall over while standing still twice, and he'd lost count of how many times she'd dropped things by just fumbling them. How could such a skilled person be so clumsy?

He had even gone so far as to ask around about her past, and it turned out that while the clumsiness was something she'd always had, the stellar control seemed to be something new. Perhaps her talent was always latent, just waiting to explode when this world got integrated. But he had bigger fish to fry than to figure out that mystery.

The solution to his problems that he'd finally found was an array called **[E-grade Origin Array]**. It was an array that showed the unique energy signatures of all the people within its reach, and the signature depended on the origin of the person.

That meant that the demons would have pretty similar signatures, just like

the humans and Ishiate would have similar signatures within their cohorts. He had already silently escorted the few Zhix who were stationed in Port Atwood away so that they wouldn't add confusion to the results. That left the shape-shifters, who should have their own unique signatures.

Normally, this plan wouldn't work, since the capitals of the Multiverse were melting pots of people with all kinds of origins. Besides, higher-grade concealment skills would be able to change even the signatures they emitted, rendering the array useless. Even worse, everyone would notice it being activated since it shot out a not-so-discreet pulse.

Using such an array was akin to using inspection skills on everyone in a town and was considered to be extremely rude and overbearing. If you were unlucky, some hidden powerhouse might be staying in the city, and he or she might take offense to being exposed like that. All this made the Origin Array mostly useless, and it wasn't one of the better-known arrays.

But the current situation of Port Atwood created the possibility of his plan working. First of all, the population was extremely homogenous. Secondly, the shape-shifters were only F-grade, meaning that they didn't possess access to skills strong enough to hide from the array.

Ogras placed ten E-grade crystals in the core of the array, and it was with great relief he saw it hum into life. The tabletop in front of them changed, and soon it displayed the whole island. The next moment, a pulse was emitted from the core beneath the table, and it quickly spread out to cover the whole island.

Azh'Rodum was the first town to get covered, and the map was quickly filling with similar red lights. A few blue lights also started shimmering, and Ogras guessed those were the humans who lived in Azh'Rodum as miners. The pulse kept expanding outward until it reached the array flags that were planted in the ocean roughly a hundred meters away from the shore. It had been a pain in the ass to put all those things into place.

Ogras had been forced to grapple with everything from enormous fish to oversized lizard-things that lived on the western shores of the island. MacKenzie had called them crocodiles, though they apparently hadn't been as large before this world got integrated.

Finally, they spotted lights that seemed out of place – three golden dots huddled together a few hours' travel away from Port Atwood. They might be Ishiate who had wandered off, but Ogras' guts told him otherwise.

“This thing consumes huge amounts of money; we can't keep it activated

forever. Tell me if you see them move or if new ones crop up,” Ogras said, and the next second stepped on the teleporter.

The next moment, he appeared in the array closest to the signatures, and he immediately melded with the shadows as he rushed toward the shape-shifters with all the speed he could muster.

“Two more at number 23, not moving.” The voice of the Sky Gnome reached him through the crystal.

Ogras only grunted in confirmation as he kept moving forward. He had hoped there would only be the one, but there were already five signatures on the map. With the help of his Late-stage seed, he was like a ghost as he pushed through the forest.

This was also the first real battle since he was freed from the restrictions of the system, and his Dexterity was completely unlocked, now sitting at over 400. His Wisdom and Intelligence weren’t as high as he would have liked still, but he hoped that he would be able to bridge those gaps with his three trials before attempting to evolve again.

He finally reached the spot the map indicated, and immediately activated his ocular skill. For a while, he didn’t notice anything out of place, but he suddenly looked at a tree that had a suspicious lack of Cosmic Energy. He immediately took out his spear, and with one swift move, crushed the tree into splinters.

A small trapdoor was exposed, and Ogras smirked before turning into shadows again as he dropped down inside. Three extremely startled humans sat huddled in a room of roughly thirty square meters. The floors and walls were pressed mud, and it was clear that they had dug the room out of the ground itself.

“Hey, what are you—” one of the men said, but he didn’t get further before his throat was pierced with a stab from Ogras’ spear.

The other two men realized there would be no subterfuge and immediately unleashed waves of golden flames in the cramped room. A ring on Ogras’ finger lit up, and a shield blocked out all the flames as he stabbed outward with this spear twice more.

A few seconds later, the flames had died down, leaving only three somewhat charred corpses. Ogras gathered anything that had survived the fire into his Cosmos Sack before he opened the Town Shop menu and bought another small teleportation array.

“Three down. Any updates?”

“Twenty-three targets,” a slightly helpless voice echoed back from the other side, and Ogras groaned in exasperation.

“Who are closest to the settlements?”

“Teleporter 33, twenty-five miles to the west,” Calrin quickly responded.

Ogras kept moving from hideout to hideout, and it was as though the god of death had descended upon the island. There was no talk, no negotiation, no prisoners. Every cultist he found was ripped to shreds the moment he found them since he didn’t want to risk one of them escaping again like the slippery one he’d failed to kill last time.

“A target is moving toward the Academy,” Calrin suddenly said with some worry through the crystal.

Some worry filled Ogras’ heart upon hearing that. That was where Alea and MacKenzie were currently staying. He bought yet another Teleportation Array and jumped into it the moment it was stabilized. He immediately rushed toward the house where the two were hiding and found the poison mistress sitting outside, keeping an eye on the surroundings.

She seemed surprised to see him and immediately ran over toward him as she kept looking around for any hidden threats.

“Are they coming?” Alea asked with some worry as her brows furrowed.

Ogras didn’t answer and instead immediately skewered her heart with his lance. At the same time, dozens of shadowy spears gored her body from every angle. Blood flowed like a fountain, and she slumped over with shocked eyes.

“How...?” She coughed, but the next moment, she lifelessly fell over.

The next moment, the door opened, and both Alea and MacKenzie looked out of the house. The moment they saw Ogras, they immediately swallowed a piece of Springroot. Ogras looked down at the copy of his general with a sneer.

“You’re years too late to try a trick like that on me,” Ogras muttered in disdain.

He searched the body and found another of those ghastly knives that even were enough to kill that human cockroach of a teammate. Ogras’ heart couldn’t help tightening upon seeing it since it showed just how close to death he had been.

The last shape-shifter had likely tried to lure him over and quickly kill him with the dagger. If he’d also managed to kill Alea afterward, he would have been able to essentially run rampant in the town. Ilvere was the

strongest fighter apart from them, but his skill set was not suited to dealing with assassins.

“Good work,” a voice said, and Ogras turned to see MacKenzie walking over with a water bottle.

“Do you have anything stronger?” he muttered, but in the end accepted the bottle anyway.

“That stuff is not good for you,” Kenzie said with the voice of someone having repeated herself innumerable times.

Alea looked at the two with a slight frown before snorting and walking away, pointedly ignoring the mauled copy of herself on the ground. Ogras shot her a glance and shook his head with a sigh. She was likely leaving to keep watching that tree up in the mountains. That left himself and MacKenzie alone in the small courtyard, silently watching the sunset.

“So when are you leaving?” Kenzie suddenly asked.

“We’ll do a sweep again tomorrow, and if all is clear, I will leave immediately after,” Ogras answered. “I don’t know how long it will take inside, but I want to be back before your brother returns.”

“I’ve heard those places can be pretty crazy,” Kenzie muttered, looking over at him with a steady stare. “Stay safe.”

“I will.”

INTO THE FIRE

Thea noticed Zac's hesitation and stopped as well.

"What's going on?" she asked with vigilance while her eyes flashed with shimmering light, indicating she was using her observation skills. "I can't sense anything wrong."

"My danger sense is acting up," Zac admitted as he took active control of his mental defense skill.

"Danger sense, a skill?" Thea asked skeptically.

"Not really, just high Luck," Zac admitted.

"The more I learn about your situation, the more pissed off I get," Thea muttered under her breath.

"You and Ogras could start a club about it." Zac snorted, though not relaxing his vigilance as he looked around.

"Is it the mountain?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," Zac said, his frown only deepening.

It was an extremely disconcerting feeling to have his danger sense constantly warn him about something that he couldn't pinpoint, and it felt like doom was constantly hanging over him. After a brief discussion, they decided to change the mountain. But the feeling didn't disappear for over two hours, making him almost believe his sense was on the fritz.

But the feeling suddenly intensified by a large degree, and he whirled around without hesitation, his axe ready. Facing them just ten meters away was a small, unassuming Zhix warrior releasing no aura at all, to the point that it might as well be a level 1 mortal. The moment Zac saw the insectoid, he immediately took out his dagger, but he soon gave up the idea when he saw the ladder position of the insectoid in front of them.

“Inevitability,” Zac said with a stoic face, though his heart started beating like a drum.

It truly was the first-place holder on the Hunter Ladder and one of the beings who stood at the peak of their world. Their plans and objectives were a mystery, and the fact that it had somehow appeared right in front of them couldn't spell anything but trouble.

“That's me,” the Zhix said, a small smile on their face. “I have looked forward to meeting Super Brother-Man.”

“I thought you'd be an Anointed,” Zac said, trying to buy some time while he figured out what to do.

“Don't compare us to those poor miscreations. Do you know what the Anointed are? It's forced mutation through alchemy. They call it the Rite of Anointment, but they only stuff themselves full of natural treasures, hoping the surge of energy won't explode them,” the Zhix scoffed.

Zac didn't relax just because the Zhix seemed happy to talk, but rather the opposite. It looked like Inevitability felt everything was in its control, even after knowing who he was. His hand stayed close to his pouch, ready to take out his token at a moment's notice.

He finally understood how the cultivators had felt when they were trapped by Zac and Thea. The Zhix in front of him didn't emit any aura, but Zac knew that it was above his own level by a large margin. The insectoid seemed content to speak at the moment, but Zac couldn't figure out its real goal.

He now understood that the sense of danger came from Inevitability stalking them, and it was a proof of its ability that it could follow them for hours without them finding the slightest clue of its presence. He could only pray that it was due to Inevitability possessing some class with stealth capabilities rather than it simply being so far above them in power that it could easily hide from their senses.

“They invented it to combat us back in the day, you know?” Inevitability continued. “The unenlightened needed quick boosts in power to combat our superior strength during the Great War. But that path to power has a price; they will never ascend to the E-grade. Soon they will be irrelevant, left behind as symbols of a misguided struggle.”

“So what is your goal? Our new world is getting ravaged by foreign invaders, but I've yet to hear of you closing any incursions,” Zac probed.

“That battle is not for us, but we are rooting for your victory,” the Zhix

said with a teasing smile.

“Why?” Zac asked skeptically.

“Void chose you as a fulcrum, but I remain unconvinced, so I searched you out while he is busy. Why should I hold myself back if you can’t even fulfill your designated fate?” the Zhix muttered.

“A fulcrum?” Zac asked with a frown. It wasn’t a great feeling to be part of some scheme of Void’s Disciple, the strongest being on the planet.

Unfortunately, the Zhix didn’t seem interested in divulging any more intelligence. The next moment a terrifying aura was unleashed from the seemingly unassuming Zhix, and Zac took a step back in shock.

Zac had recently made huge improvements to his combat power with his second class and new round of titles. That had made him feel almost invincible on Earth. He had thought that even if he wasn’t an even match against the Dominators, he would at least be able to put up a decent fight. Perhaps he would even be able to kill them if needed with a surprising burst of power through **[Hatchetman’s Rage]**.

However, only now did he truly understand the folly of his inflated ego. The aura that was being emitted was just monstrous and not something that would come from some random cultivator. Inevitability had clearly had its own sets of lucky encounters to power it as well, and with this high level, the result felt almost impossible to overcome.

Of course, the aura was nothing compared to what he sensed from his meeting with Greatest or the imprint of the Great Redeemer. But their auras felt so far beyond his own that making an accurate measure of their strength was impossible.

Inevitability’s aura was within his scope of understanding, but it was far beyond what he could unleash by himself. Furthermore, it was powered by an immense killing intent that could only come from killing hundreds of thousands of beings.

The Zhix warrior barely reached Zac’s chin, but it felt like Zac was staring at an enormous beast when he was inundated in Inevitability’s aura. He quickly released his own to combat the oppressive feeling, getting ready for battle. It was clear that the Dominator had come for a fight after all.

Zac didn’t dare to hold anything back, and Thea was clearly of the same opinion. But their goal wasn’t to defeat the Zhix.

“Flee,” Zac only said through gritted teeth before he disappeared, appearing over a hundred meters away the next moment with an attack ready.

He sent five huge edges empowered by the Dao of Heaviness toward Inevitability, hoping to push it back.

“Not bad,” the Zhix said, a smile still adorning its face.

The huge edges ripped through the air with enormous power, destroying trees and boulders as they flew straight toward Inevitability. The Zhix lifted its hand, and two odd chains emerged from its back and almost floated in the air in front of it.

It was truly odd, as one moment Zac thought he saw two silver snakes floating in the air, but the next moment, they were chains again. They kept swapping back and forth, making it impossible to understand which was their true state. When Zac’s attacks closed in, the two chains formed a circle, and a huge fractal suddenly appeared in the middle of them, shining with a silver luster.

The fractal edges slammed into the erected defense one by one with enough force to decimate a city block, but it was to no avail, as the fractal didn’t even budge from the onslaught. The next moment, tens of daggers descended from the skies, each glistening with a cold sharpness.

It was the work of Thea and another attack Zac hadn’t seen her use before. He could also sense that the falling daggers were imbued with something similar to his Dao of Sharpness, perhaps the Dao of Penetration.

The knives whistled as they ripped through the air, falling down at Inevitability with the force of small meteors. But the Dominator suddenly disappeared and reappeared outside the attack range of the daggers, which rained death unto an empty patch of grass.

The next moment, the two silver chains shot out from Inevitability, and they both flew toward Zac and Thea like bloodhounds having gained the scent of their prey. The power contained in the chains was terrifying, and neither wanted to clash with the weird things head-on.

Since the moment Zac launched his attacks, he’d also utilized their movement skills to the maximum, desperately running away from the battle. But the chains were closing in on them, and Zac started to feel intense mental pressure as they approached. It felt like the chains emitted some sort of binding power, and moving was getting harder the closer they got.

He could only take active control of [**Mental Fortress**] to protect himself from whatever effect the fractals were bringing, and he summoned two more fractal edges with [**Chop**] as he ran. When he saw that the stretch ahead was clear, he jumped up in the air and launched the two strikes at the incoming

chains before he landed again.

The maneuver didn't cost him any speed, but even though he felt the shockwaves from his attacks hitting the pursuing attacks, he sensed that they weren't destroyed. However, he did sense that the pressure lessened somewhat, so he kept at it as he fled.

They kept running for thirty minutes, constantly using their movement skills to try to shake off the chains. But it appeared they were able to grow impossibly long and kept up with them as they fled. Both Zac and Thea were also forced to keep attacking them as they ran to keep them at bay.

At least it was somewhat effective, and they finally managed to destroy the two pursuing snake-chains just before reaching one of the cracks in the earth. It stretched over a hundred meters across, much too far for them to jump with their current power.

They were just about to run toward the north alongside the crack, but suddenly, they heard a crack from a twig snapping.

"I am impressed," the familiar voice said from just next to them, making Zac jump away in surprise. "The power was split between two chains, but the fact that F-grade warriors managed to destroy them is very impressive."

Zac was breathing heavily from his desperate flight, but Inevitability stood just fifty meters away from them as though it had been there from the very beginning. Zac looked back at the large chasm that seemed to reach toward the core of the earth, a bottomless pit.

They had their backs toward the wall, and Zac knew it wasn't the time to hold anything back anymore. There was simply no way for them to escape from Inevitability; its speed was far above their own.

The only reason they were still alive seemed to be that it was only toying with them, but for what reason he couldn't fathom. But that didn't mean that it would let them go, and Zac prepared his last gambit.

The energy in the surroundings started to enter him with torrential force as he activated [**Hatchetman's Rage**] as his forearm was being flooded with Cosmic Energy. Thea was doing the same, and the air around her left arm shimmered with extremely condensed power.

"Your final cards?" the Zhix said as it curiously looked at them with an excited grin.

The next moment, an enormous hand once again emerged from the crack in space above him. The hand hadn't grown larger from the upgrade, but it emitted a force condensed enough that it could rival the Dominator's aura. It

almost looked like it was tattooed with a dense print of fractals as well, creating clearly demarcated rings on the fingers.

The Zhix frowned when it saw the incoming hand, and tens of chains emerged from behind it, combining into a huge snake that moved to intercept **[Nature's Punishment]**. But the rings on the fingers of the hand suddenly lit up with a green luster, and the silver snake was briefly unable to move.

Zac was surprised by the added effect of his attack, but he wouldn't let it go to waste as he used all the power he could bring to bear to slam the hand down on Inevitability. The insectoid roared in anger, and the air around it started twisting from the power it emitted.

The hand slammed into the ground with enough force that cracks were starting to form for over a hundred meters, making Zac worried that the whole stretch of land they stood on would fall into the chasm behind them.

But Zac didn't have time to think about that, as intense pain consumed him as the enormous wooden hand was ripped in two, and a bloodied Inevitability emerged. It wasn't unscathed from the attack, though, with its right arm limply hanging at an odd angle, and blood was dripping from its mouth from internal injuries.

"Void Piercer," Thea muttered with a low voice, and the next moment, it was as though a tube of the void itself stretched toward the Zhix with lightning speed.

Unfortunately, it looked like Thea had trouble controlling the skill, and she faltered almost as soon as she unleashed the attack, making it hit slightly off the mark. The spear wrought out of gray energies hit the Dominator in its gut, but there was no shockwave or huge explosion.

But a perfect hole appeared in the body of the Zhix, and the hole also kept going for another twenty meters, cutting straight through a boulder and a couple of trees. It was like she had used a supremely powerful railgun that disintegrated everything in its path, and Zac could only sigh in regret that it hadn't hit a more lethal spot.

Inevitability coughed as it held its broken arm, blood streaming down from its wounded side. But Zac was disappointed to see that the Zhix was still in fighting condition, and the wound was closing itself with speed discernible to the naked eye.

Even worse, the lackadaisical manner of the Dominator was gone, replaced with burning fury.

FALLING

Zac sighed and looked over at Thea, who already held her token ready in hand. Their gambit had failed, and now it looked like they had thoroughly pissed off their enemy. Leaving seemed to be their only solution.

However, inside Zac's heart, there was a staunch unwillingness to crush the token, even if things looked extremely bleak. It was as though he felt that something would change inside him if he fled like this. He was trying to gain enough power to protect Port Atwood and all his family, and the title from the hunt was one of the few available upgrades for him at the moment.

"Shit, it hurts," Inevitability growled as torrential amounts of energy gathered above their head. "I wasn't going to kill you, but I'll just have to apologize to Father. Fulcrums can be changed."

The next moment, they were beset by hundreds of chains shooting toward them like homing missiles, each of them carrying enough power to seriously wound them. Zac quickly erected his upgraded [**Nature's Barrier**] and placed it as far from his body as possible to intercept the incoming attacks as he placed himself in front of Thea.

"I'll figure something out. I'll help delay if you want to crush the token," Zac quickly muttered as he faced Inevitability.

But he was shaken when he saw the first chain simply rip straight through the emerald leaf without being impeded overly much. It contained a new force that the chains didn't have before, and it felt extremely powerful.

Zac couldn't be sure, but he had a feeling that it was an upgraded or fused Dao Seed that empowered the chains to this degree. He had only been thinking of the huge attribute bonuses such a thing would bring, but the battle power it provided was nothing short of horrifying as well.

The closest chain flew straight toward Zac, who only had time to lift his arm in defense. A loud crack could be heard, and Zac felt a blinding pain as his arm was broken from the tremendous impact.

Zac felt some hopelessness when he saw the innumerable chains following close behind. There was no way he could survive long enough for him to crush the token and last the seconds until he was teleported. He didn't even have any way to help Thea out for long enough for her to escape.

But the next moment, he was lifted from his feet, and his eyes widened as he was suddenly falling down the chasm. Thea was right next to him, holding his robe by the neck with a determined expression.

However, Inevitability's attack didn't stop there, as the incoming chains followed them down the chasm, descending even faster than they were falling. Zac prayed this gambit would be enough as he took out his token.

But the next moment, an intense mental shock slammed into his mind, and **[Mental Fortress]** wasn't enough to completely stop it. It felt like his soul was getting shredded to pieces, making him spasm and drop the token.

"No reprieve for you," he heard echoing down from above, and Zac looked up to see the sneering face of Inevitability standing up at the ledge.

He did what he could with his defenses, but his desperation grew as he was getting pelted by one attack after another as they kept falling. His vision started to get blurry, but suddenly, a blinding light lit up next to him as a similarly wounded Thea shone like a goddess.

But Zac didn't have a chance to see what she did, as a fractal chain slammed straight into his head, knocking him unconscious.

Zac woke up with a cough, and it took quite a while to orient himself. At first, he thought darkness had descended once again while he was out, but to his relief, he found that wasn't the case, as he saw the sun far up in the sky.

He was at the bottom of the chasm in a crater he suspected was of his own making. The area was almost completely shrouded in darkness, because even if the sun shone up in the sky, most of the light didn't reach the bottom of the extremely deep crack he found himself in.

Every part of him hurt, and he even had a couple of broken bones. But the clearest indicator he'd barely survived the fall was that he'd turned into his

Draugr form.

He guessed that the fall had essentially killed him, and his core had turned him into an undead once again. The first thing he did after orienting himself, even before taking a pill, was to open up the ladders. He scoured them over, and to his relief, saw that Thea's name was still there.

He knew she hadn't tried to kill him when she had grabbed him and jumped down the cliff. He knew he was all out of options in that battle. He had already used everything he had, but it wasn't enough.

That thing was truly a monster. Zac couldn't even kill it when it went easy on them, but after it imbued its attack with an evolved Dao, he was almost helpless against it. Perhaps he would need such a Dao of his own before he could compete with it.

Jumping down was a last-ditch attempt to survive, but he didn't really understand what had happened afterward. That final attack had knocked him unconscious, and the last thing he remembered was Thea lighting up like a beacon.

At first, he thought she had used some defensive treasure to survive, but after looking around, he couldn't find her anywhere, not even any hint of her having fallen down. The fact that she was still on the ladder meant that she hadn't teleported out, though, leaving him even more confused.

Since he couldn't find her, he sat down and took out one of the top-tier healing pills and a couple of Miasma stones to absorb. He didn't move for a full hour, fully focusing on recuperating his body. The fall wasn't the only thing that had hurt him; the fight that preceded it had taken a toll as well.

Meeting one of the true Dominators had been a sobering wake-up call. With his dual classes and plethora of titles, he thought that even if he might not be quite as strong, the difference shouldn't be too large.

But reality had proven different. He had a feeling that the only reason that he was still alive was that the Dominator wasn't trying to kill him in the beginning for some reason. It rather felt like he was being toyed with. He had even tried to take advantage of that fact to mount a sneak attack with the help of Hatchetman's Rage, but even that had failed spectacularly. The power of that monstrous Dominator was just insurmountable for the current him.

That begged the question as to why there hadn't been a single report of their activities thus far. If they wanted to, they should have no problem destroying any incursion, reaping the benefits. Since they didn't shy away from Cosmic Energy like their brethren, they shouldn't have an aversion to

collecting titles that could help them get even stronger.

The only clue that he'd gained from the fight was the mention of a plan and his being a fulcrum of it somehow. His guess was that they were biding their time for whatever Void's Disciple had planned.

Zac released a tired sigh as he went over his hurt body. Strong enemies just kept popping up. First, it was the mysterious Redeemer, then the Dominators, who were stronger than expected and who were also working on some grand plan that appeared to impact the whole world.

In any case, there wasn't much he could do about it where he was currently stuck. Perhaps Ibtep could be of assistance in figuring out the situation when he got back. He wouldn't waste his time with this in the middle of the hunt, and since he was mostly healed after an hour, he stood up with a groan.

That thought brought up a new question. Zac got an ominous feeling as he checked his Cosmos Sack. But his fears were true; he had lost his token. The mental attack from Inevitability had made him lose his grip on the token as he fell down, and even after looking around for close to an hour, he couldn't find it anywhere.

That meant he had lost his opportunity to escape this hunt early. He would either stay the whole duration or die. A few of his ribs were still cracked, but he didn't want to stay here. However, the question was where the hell he should go. He could either try to climb up the cliff again or keep exploring this hidden rift.

But after a few more minutes, he realized he didn't actually have much of an option. The walls were just insanely hard, and he couldn't cut footholds even with the help of **[Verun's Bite]**. And since he didn't possess Thea's skills of finding a purchase from the smallest space, he just had no way to get back up to the mountains.

Worse yet, he realized he might be in trouble. The reason that the stones were hard was likely that they had been infused with the odd darkness that spanned this fallen sect. There was an unmistakable aura in the very rocks themselves all around him.

He was starting to form a hypothesis as he looked around. There were small cracks in various places along the stone, and these cracks had a far higher amount of the sinister aura. Whatever the darkness was, it might originate from this very ravine and other ones like it all along the area, and the true source of the darkness seeped out from those cracks during the night.

He still had no idea just what the darkness was. It could be described as a mental poison that made both beasts and people turn insane. The last times, he hadn't been in any danger, staying hidden far from the specters' feeding ground. But what would happen if darkness descended while he stood right at the source?

The prospect was enough to make Zac's hair stand on end, and his urgency to escape the chasm increased many times over. At least it was still midday, and he had ample time to get out of here before night came.

It seemed random which days the darkness descended, but it invariably happened in the deep of the night. That meant Zac had almost twelve hours to get out before he was in any danger of getting caught in the middle of an endless onslaught of endless specters.

So Zac started to walk along the rift in order to find any way to get back up. At first, he planned on randomly choosing his path, but he soon changed his mind and headed north.

The reason was that he felt a small gust of wind coming from that direction, which might mean that there was a passage in that direction that could let him leave this creepy place. Urgency pushed his tired body forward, and he ignored his body's protests as he kept a rapid pace.

However, the ravine felt almost endless as he walked for hours. The gust of wind he'd felt was clearly just some wayward wind from the ground level. The only thing of note he'd found during his walk was a couple of corpses.

He was no expert in judging the cause of death, especially when a couple of the corpses were just meat paste, but he believed that not all the bodies had died due to the fall. Some were cleanly beheaded or had other wounds, making Zac believe that the bodies had been dumped by their killers.

There was no evidence, though, that anyone had been alive down in the crevasse, and Zac wasn't surprised. The height of the fall was over a thousand meters, and even he with close to 400 Endurance would have died from the fall if it wasn't for his core giving him another go at life.

Suddenly, it got darker, and Zac frowned as he looked up. He was relieved to see that it actually didn't suddenly become night, but rather that the ravine closed up at the ground level. However, the subterranean level continued on, and Zac's eyes widened when he saw what was up ahead.

There were actually signs of there being human activity in front of him.

Not now in regard to the hunt, but once upon a time. There was a square made with pitch-black cobblestones that spanned roughly two hundred meters

across.

Even though Zac initially felt elated that he might find a way out of here, he quickly got a sinking feeling as he looked at the place. He had thought that since there was development down here, there might also be a path up, but he started to believe that might not be the case.

The only thing in the square was a huge cracked obelisk that was completely covered in fractals. The obelisk reached over fifty meters in height, and each side was over five meters across. At the foot of the obelisk in the direction of Zac, there were two chains attached that radiated an otherworldly suppression and weight.

But the chains were cracked and held nothing at their other end. This was some sort of prison, but the prisoner was nowhere in sight.

SQUARE UP

There was an unmistakable aura of the suffocating darkness permeating the cracked ends of the chains, which gave some hints about whatever was once trapped in the middle of the square. Zac could only guess that the inscriptions on the obelisk were meant to keep it suppressed, but that obviously didn't work out in the end.

He couldn't tell whether the prisoner was able to destroy the obelisk, or whether the obelisk cracked for some other reason, which allowed the captive to escape. But then again, it didn't really matter. What mattered was how long ago the prisoner escaped.

If it was something that happened thousands of years ago, then it was fine. But if it was something that was set in motion the moment the trial started, he might be in grave danger. It was a real possibility that whatever was once held here might be the source of the darkness and perhaps even the thing that released the harrowing wail during the attacks.

Another possibility was that the thing captured here had gotten thoroughly corrupted by the darkness, which gave it enough power to escape from its shackles. Then it might mean that it had gone crazed the same way as the cultivators who got possessed, and was currently roaming the chasm.

In either case, it was bad news for Zac. Something this powerful wasn't something he could contend with, even if he got back to perfect health. He once again internally swore at Inevitability for making him lose his token, putting him in this dire situation.

Still, he didn't want to give in to despair just yet. Even if the source of the darkness was once imprisoned here, it didn't make sense for it to stay on after it made its escape. He slowly made his way toward the square, maintaining

an extreme vigil all the while.

There was an unmistakable aura of power still radiating from the towering obelisk, even if there was a large crack that had destroyed a good number of the fractals. The obelisk might even protect from the darkness if it descended once again, making this one of the safer places around.

Before he stepped into the square, he carefully looked down at the stones to see if there was anything out of place. Perhaps there were other arrays active at a place like this that might spell trouble for him in the end. But when he looked down, he saw that there were extremely intricate inscriptions on all the small cobblestones. However, each and every stone had a crack running through it, ruining the fractals that covered them.

Zac was actually slightly relieved to see that the fractals were ruined, since it lessened the risk of him getting trapped inside whatever this square originally did. But before he stepped into the square, he took one last hesitant look back.

If he was to turn back, then this was the time. It was getting late by now, but if he pushed himself, he might make it back to the spot where he first fell down into the chasm before darkness could descend. But the problem was that he didn't have any idea what to do after that.

The chasms ran across the whole mountain range, and he'd seen many that passed over ten mountains. There was no guarantee that there would be any exit waiting for him if he went the other way, but only more dark passageways.

So it was with grim determination he placed his right foot upon the square, leaving the natural stone floor of the chasm. When he stepped on the cobblestone, he immediately felt a suffocating pressure, almost bringing him down to his knees.

The pressure didn't only bear down on his body, but also his very being. It was a mental suppression as well, making his mind feel muddled and his thoughts scattered. However, Zac growled and kept going, activating his Dao of Heaviness to counteract the suppression around him somewhat.

But after just two more steps, he realized that the pressure had multiplied, and with a few more meters, he would reach the limits of what he could bear. It seemed that the suppression got stronger the closer to the center of the square he was, and even if he activated **[Hatchetman's Rage]**, he wouldn't even get close to the obelisk before succumbing to the pressure.

He quickly backed away right to the edge of the square once again, the

broken ribs screaming in protest from being subjected to this added pressure. It felt like someone was digging around his side with a hot poker, and if Zac hadn't been already deathly pale in his undead form, he would have definitely paled from the pain.

The weight came from an array that was essentially broken, with both the cobblestones and the obelisk ruined beyond repair. Zac's attributes were already higher than most people at early E-grade, but he'd only managed to take a few steps in this prison.

Just how strong was the thing that once was trapped here in these chains, to not only survive but even break out?

It was as though the obelisk was the source of a local gravity zone, and the closer he was, the worse it would get. This relative heaviness gave Zac an idea for his Dao Seed, but now wasn't the time to ponder on it any further. He needed to leave the square and find safety before night fell.

At least it wasn't all bad news. After having walked a few steps along the edge of the square, something that was once hidden behind the obelisk came into view. It was a doorway, and he was hoping that it would take him up toward the ground.

Since something had been trapped down here, Zac figured there would be guards, and they needed a way to access this place from the surface. The door might give him access to the path that would let him leave.

Since he couldn't simply cross the square, he needed to tread along the edges, which barely allowed him to pass through. Still, after only fifty meters, sweat was streaming down his face from the strain, and every wound on his body had reopened.

But he couldn't rush out of the array either, since every step was a struggle. In the end, he was submerged in the intense pressure for half an hour before he pushed open the doors on the opposite side of the square with great relief.

The insides were actually lit up by crystals in the wall, showing that the inscriptions that kept this place running were still operational. There was no way that the crystals would last for thousands of years by themselves, meaning there was a gathering array supplying the place with energy.

Other than that, it was completely empty, just a long hallway that seemed to stretch into eternity. Zac hesitated a bit, but eventually, he decided to hold off on heading down the hallway. Now that he had found a secluded spot that seemed pretty safe, he sat down and closed his eyes, though still gripping his

axe just in case.

The main reason he dared to relax like this was that the moment he'd entered this hidden pathway, the ominous aura from the darkness was completely gone. It was unlikely that any of the ghastly specters had ever walked these halls.

He couldn't be completely sure, but he felt that he would be safe in here even if darkness descended once again. But then again, he didn't have a lot of options apart from staying here during the night. With the intense aura that the cracks out in in the canyon emitted, he didn't dare stay there during the night.

The reason he stopped before exploring any further was that he had found a great clue to upgrade his Dao from the suppressive formations outside, and he didn't want to waste any time in going over it. It actually felt extremely clear in his mind, perhaps since he had been steeped in the suppression.

He was imagining heaviness as it worked with a gravity source, such as a sun or a black hole. The heaviness came from a source, and the closer one came, the more the pressure increased. This wasn't really something that was possible to encounter normally on Earth, but the arrays outside had created that very phenomenon outside.

He imagined himself a black hole, and the closer one came, the heavier the pressure of his aura would be, to the point of crushing everything that got too close. Upgrading his Dao came with surprising ease, bringing his Dao of Heaviness to High grade, just like his Dao of Trees. It was a great relief because this was something that had troubled him since he got here.

He'd been caught in four very intense fights and many minor scuffles since he had arrived here. The battles against Salvation and Inevitability were particularly taxing. Yet he'd gained barely any insight into his Dao Seeds since he had arrived. It was as though this place somehow blocked the Dao from him, preventing him from progressing further. But the immense arrays on the square had finally allowed him to push through.

He was also happy to see that this particular upgrade only gave him strength.

Heaviness (High): Strength +45, Endurance +10, Wisdom +5

He was already planning on putting points into Strength to boost his fighting prowess, and this was a great step in the right direction. He only

wished there were some enemies down here as well so that he could finish grinding his two Class Quests as well. He was pretty sure that at least one of them would give him a new vision, adding to his steadily growing Dao repertoire.

The whole process had taken him roughly two hours, and since he was finally done with everything, he got to his feet with a grunt. Staying still for this long also helped his body recuperate from both the wounds and passing the square, and he felt a lot better by now.

Zac started to head down the endless hallway, already wishing that Thea was there to use her scouting abilities to find any hidden dangers. Since he was back on his own, he could only rely on his default method, brute force.

He held **[Verun's Bite]** in a firm grip as he kept a brisk pace, eyeing the vicinity for anything that might be out of place. The hallway was created with expert craftsmanship with clean surfaces floor to ceiling, and the illuminating crystals were placed at exactly measured distances from each other.

After pushing forward for thirty minutes, he knew something was amiss. There was no reason to build such an insanely long hallway, as it would probably be both easier and cheaper to place down two low-grade teleportation arrays for transportation.

He took out a high-quality dagger he'd looted in the past days and carved a "1" under the next illuminating crystal he encountered. From there on, he kept increasing the count by one as he carved a number under each and every stone he passed.

Suddenly, when he was about to carve the eighty-second marker, he saw that the spot was already occupied by the very same "1" that he first carved. Zac sighed and sat down.

It was as he thought; he was inside some sort of array that tricked his mind somehow. It either made him walk in circles without noticing, or it somehow connected two spaces so that when he walked past the eighty-first mark, he arrived back at the start.

However, he had no idea where the start and the end were. He'd just marked down number 1 when he started counting, but it might just as well be the middle of the hallway. But at least he knew the length of the hallway by now, and it wasn't actually that long, just a couple of hundred meters.

He walked the full length three times over, trying to discern any way to get out by any means possible. He used **[Inquisitive Eye]** as well, but nothing happened. Next, he tried to sense any disturbances in the Cosmic

Energy in the air, but it gave no clue either.

Finally, he sat down and took out the formation crystal that was the first thing he found inside this hunt. He had been extremely busy over the past two weeks hunting and fighting, but he finally had time to go over it.

He browsed through the contents page by page, arduously going over each and every detail. A vast majority of the information was above his understanding at the moment, but he was quickly getting a deeper understanding of formations.

Thus far, he had only used arrays provided by the System, and they even came with guidance systems that helped him set them up. But this crystal was meant to teach him about the foundations and the basic workings of the knowledge of formations.

Zac didn't even understand the difference between an array and a formation in the beginning, but he soon realized the difference. Arrays were just man-made formations, creating various types of effects with array flags or array disks. All the arrays he had encountered so far were these types of formations.

But formations didn't necessarily need to be created by placing down an array. They could naturally form in nature, and the most powerful formations in the Multiverse had naturally formed over billions of years, almost like a solar system.

There was one passage in the beginning that Zac found particularly interesting, and it was imprinted by a grand elder of the Eastern Trigram Sect, someone who was a pure Array Master.

DAO OF FORMATIONS

It is folly to believe the study of formations to be differentiated from other pursuits such as alchemy or even fighting. All are children to the same parent, the boundless Dao.

Zac was quickly getting engrossed as he kept reading the introduction by the Array Master, almost even forgetting his current predicament of being stuck inside what he assumed was an entrapment array.

The alchemist gives form to Dao through concoctions of pills, and the warrior gives form to Dao through unleashing devastating attacks. Even the farmer gives form to Dao through plowing the fields. But none is as multifaceted as the study of formations. It is not bound through medium or execution, but is boundless just like the Dao itself.

Through learning the fundamentals of constructing arrays, any Dao can be given shape. Furthermore, even if the Dao concepts behind a formation eludes your grasp, one can still bring out 80% of its power through sheer knowledge of proper placements.

To understand the role of array flags, one only needs to look inside themselves. The body consists of crossroads, the major ones being the Soul Aperture and the Cosmic Core. But these two alone are not enough to sustain a warrior.

Minor nodes can be found at every intersection inside the body, as anyone who has reached E-grade knows. These can both store and direct power so that magnificent effects can be brought to bear.

Placing an array flag is akin to breaking open one of the nodes, letting the energies of heavens and earth flow through it. Placement dictates the flow of power; the fractals dictate the nature of power. When a complete system

has been created through the flags, a pathway for cultivation is born.

There were a few parts he didn't understand, but he got the general gist of it. An array was essentially a closed system of energy in circulation, just like the pathways inside his body. That explained why the easiest way to destroy an array in its entirety was to destroy one of the array flags, since that would interrupt or at least weaken the energy circulation.

Of course, more robust arrays would survive one or a few array flags being destroyed, but they would always lose some of their effectiveness. While he believed the Array Master was a bit partial in his introduction, Zac ardently kept reading to deepen his knowledge.

However, soon something happened that made him lose his patience. After roughly three hours of trying to gain insight into arrays, he was passed on the Gatherer Ladder, pushing him down to the second spot. It was a clear reminder that this was no time to just sit around and read. Others weren't so relaxed and kept hunting for opportunities.

Since he couldn't find any path out, he would simply have to make his own path. The reason the walls outside were so sturdy was that they were infused with the mysterious energy from the darkness, but the same couldn't be said for the tunnels around him.

Zac took out his axe, and with a mighty swing, slammed it straight into the wall next to him. Unfortunately, his plan didn't work out, and a shimmering light appeared over the wall when he hit it, protecting the wall completely. Not even the slightest scar could be seen after his strike.

Zac frowned in displeasure and once again hefted his axe, this time imbuing it with the improved Dao of Heaviness. He slammed it into the wall with all the force he could muster. But the result was the same, and the shimmering shield once again nullified the force in his strike.

It was only with some helplessness he could sit down again and continue reading the crystal. Zac didn't think that swapping over to his Hachetman class would have any effect on the results, as even with his newly improved Dao, he couldn't make a small crack in the wall.

The powers that were protecting these walls were far beyond what he could destroy. Perhaps he'd manage to do something with **[Nature's Punishment]**, but Zac would rather just sit and wait out the time of the hunt than do something that risky.

He was under a kilometer of rock, and there was just no way to know what would happen if he unleashed everything he had. The most likely

scenario was him getting buried alive with no token to help him escape if he let the huge wooden hand slam into the wall.

The hours passed, and suddenly, Zac got the familiar prompt that darkness was once again descending. But even after twenty minutes, nothing happened, proving that the ghastly specters truly didn't come to this secluded passage. Since he didn't have to defend himself against an onslaught of ghosts, he kept scouring the crystal for anything that could help him get out of here.

While it was true that he was pretty safe while ensconced in the middle of the mountain, he wasn't happy with it. He had already lost his first spot on the Gatherer Ladder, and his placements would keep dropping the following weeks if he didn't get out.

Not even half the duration of the hunt had passed, and the others would keep accumulating points while he was stuck here. If he didn't get out and start grinding again, he might actually leave the hunt without rewards from either ladder.

So Zac put all his efforts into devising an escape, putting the matter of the ladders out of his mind so as not to get distracted. The hours turned to days while Zac tried to learn more about array breaking until he suddenly got a prompt.

[Teleporting to Arena in 1 minute. Tokens Disabled.]

Zac wasn't surprised, since he hadn't done anything for three days, and he quickly put on a hood to hide the fact that he was undead as he readied his axe.

He wasn't worried about meeting anyone dangerous in this bout since only those who had shied away from battle would get sent here. In fact, Zac was a bit surprised that there were people who remained who had avoided battle for three full days.

He was more disgusted about being forced to kill someone far weaker than him just because the System deemed him a coward. But he knew there wasn't any other option for him. Zac hadn't been too surprised to find out what happened when neither party chose to fight since it was all too familiar to him.

He and Thea had caught someone like that, and he confessed what had occurred. Thea didn't believe the man, but Zac was much more prone to

believe him. If neither party had won within ten minutes, the System would perform a draw just like it did when Zac first got integrated. The winner would survive, and the loser would cease to exist.

Even though his Luck was through the roof, he wouldn't take his chances with a gamble on his life. He had people to protect, and if he was forced to kill someone to survive, he would do it, even if it wasn't fair.

The next moment, he found himself standing on a stage that floated in space. There was no sign of the mountains or valleys from the hunt, dashing his idea of getting back to the surface through leaving the arena.

He wasn't alone on the stage, as another man had been teleported here at the same moment he did. Zac frowned when he saw his opponent. To get sent here, one would have to have avoided battles for three days, but the man in front of him looked like he had just barely survived a rough bout.

He was covered in bandages that had turned red with dried blood, and some wounds seemed to have reopened recently. He looked like he had one foot in the grave, and gave off a wheezing cough the moment he appeared. Zac couldn't believe this man chose to stay inside the hunt with these kinds of wounds rather than just crushing his token.

"Forgot the time," the man said with a weak voice after looking over at Zac with a sardonic smile. He clearly understood what was going through Zac's mind. "I can't believe a monster like you got sent here as well."

Zac silently looked at the man as he stood up with some effort.

"Can I make a last request from you?"

"What is it?" Zac said after some hesitation.

He wasn't worried that there was some hidden agenda from the man. He'd already used [**Inquisitive Eye**], and together with the somewhat low ladder placements, he already knew that there was no way this man could muster up a fight against him, even if he were in perfect condition.

"I don't want my body to be left in space or those godforsaken mountains to be possessed by those ghosts again. Please bury me after you return to your homeland," he said.

"Fine," Zac said.

The man gave a weak smile, and the next moment, he slit his own throat, bleeding out in seconds.

Zac looked at the body of the man in front of him until he silently walked over and put the body into his Cosmos Sack. This brief meeting was a stark reminder that this hunt wasn't meant to help people apart from a few select

individuals. The System wanted to create powerhouses, but for that, it needed fodder.

It lured thousands of the strong to duke it out by dangling some treasures and titles in front of them, all in the hopes of creating a few powerhouses. If the others all died to achieve that goal, it was acceptable to the System.

The next moment, he found himself back in the tunnel, dashing the last hope he had of the System lending him a helping hand by teleporting him back to the surface. He ate one of his fasting pills before once again sitting down to scour the crystal for any help.

The days passed, but Zac was making steady headway, and he started to believe that he would actually be able to get out soon. It all came down to the power of the array. It was no way for him to learn enough about arrays so that he could get out by technique, but he believed he would learn enough about arrays to spot weaker spots to attack with brute force.

Those kinds of weak spots were usually quite hard to spot, but this was a passive array that didn't have an owner. If an Array Master were in control of it, he could keep moving the weak spots to impede escape, and there would be no way for Zac to slowly be able to analyze it from within without getting attacked.

But who knew how long this place had been abandoned, leaving this array to run passively. Besides, Zac suspected that the System had modified the power of all the arrays in this hunt. He believed that this sect was once at least a High E-grade or perhaps low D-grade sect, and there was no way that he should be able to break the protective arrays of top-tier E-grade Array Masters with brute force.

But Zac was once again summoned to the arena before he could make any final breakthrough in his research on the arrays. The second person he met wasn't quite as at peace with his fate as the first one. It was someone who was placed in the top three hundred on the Hunter Ladder, so no weakling by any means.

But it was also clear that he wasn't any good person. He had worn a cruel smile until he saw Zac's far higher rankings. After some questioning and arm-twisting, Zac realized that the man had avoided battle just to kill and rob a weakling in the arena. He had hoped that the people who avoided battles would spend their time finding valuable loot instead.

The man was summarily executed by Zac, who only needed to imbue a strike with his Dao of Heaviness to crush any resistance. At first, he thought

about grinding his Class Quest with the help of this man, but in the end, he decided against it.

The reason was that he felt that he was getting closer to finding a solution to his situation. The more he read about the formations, the better he could discern, and to a certain extent understand, the minute fluctuations in Cosmic Energy that permeated the tunnel.

At first, he hadn't noticed anything amiss in the air around him, as Cosmic Energy was always swirling around, almost like a wind that you could sense with your sixth sense. Its movements were chaotic and unpredictable, and Zac hadn't felt anything out of the ordinary the first times he had walked through the corridor.

But now he felt that there was a method to the madness, but it was only one day later that he felt ready to try out his theories. He had already found out what type of array this was. It was a common type of Entrapment Array that was mentioned in the crystal.

The normal way to pass this type of hurdle was to know a specific set of steps. Walking through the corridor correctly would result in the array staying inactive, but stepping out of the predetermined path would spring the trap.

Essentially, it was like a password, and Zac had no way to figure out the correct one. However, he had started to gain a slight understanding of the pathways of the Entrapment Array, and he was planning something else. He spent the next hours slowly observing the whole pathway until he finally found what he was looking for.

ANZONIL

Between the seventeenth and eighteenth marks that he carved, there was a convergence of energy flows that could be somewhat discerned if you watched it for about twenty minutes. That meant there hopefully was a weak spot in the array there, and Zac's best bet in getting out.

Swapping over to his human form would increase his attack power, but Zac still chose to try it out in his undead form first. He wanted to grind his Undead class a bit, and it was far harder to transform into a Draugr than it was to turn back into a human.

Zac took a few steadying breaths before he infused his arm with as much miasmic energy as it could bear, and with a roar, slammed his Dao-infused axe into the floor right at the intersection of energies he had spotted.

Suddenly, it almost felt like he was drunk, as he was seeing double. Two realities were superimposed on each other, and the endless hallway he'd been stuck in for a week was just one of them. The other one stopped just ten meters away from him with an intricately carved door.

Zac didn't hesitate and pushed more Miasma into his legs as he leaped toward the gate before the Entrapment Array could stabilize again. He slammed into the gate with enough force to knock the breath out of him, but he wasn't angry in the slightest.

He had finally escaped his entrapment. Zac looked back toward the other end of the hallway, and he spotted the door leading out to the square with the obelisk a few hundred meters away. But just a second later, the door disappeared, being replaced once more with the endless hallway.

His swing hadn't been enough to destroy the array, but it had been enough to cause some chaos at the endpoint, allowing him to exit it. Zac was

already itching with impatience from a week of inactivity, and he couldn't help opening the ladder to check the status, and he couldn't help being shocked by what he saw.

He had been kicked down all the way to the eleventh spot on the Gatherer Ladder, which was somewhat of a surprise to him. While it was true he'd lost a whole week down in this tunnel, he still only really had Emperor Nenotheop to compete with earlier. That ten people had managed to pass the huge amount of wealth he'd accumulated was quite shocking.

A few of the names weren't surprising, such as Starlight, Beruv Ylvas, and another of the Medhin powerhouses. He was somewhat happy to see that Thea had kept going as well, being in the sixth spot. Even more surprising was the appearance of Thomas Fisher in the eighth position.

Zac had only kept his eye on the top positions of the ladder, and he was sure that he hadn't seen Thomas in the top 100 of either list before. For him to suddenly spring up to the eighth position could only be explained with him getting the help of the whole organization.

It also proved that Thomas was more than just one of the many leaders of the New World Government. Not only was he chosen to experiment with holding on to massive amounts of wealth, he was also the one they chose to hold on to the wealth of the hunt.

Zac had a generally positive opinion of Thomas, though it was marred by the various insidious things he had found out about the government. It was also somewhat of a relief that the man was still human, since the shape-shifters shouldn't be able to get here.

But the truly shocking change was on the Hunter Ladder, with him being relegated down to the 443rd position. Before he fell down into the chasm, he had been at the 8th position, with the emperor, the Dominators, and a few more above him.

That loss in positions was huge, and it made Zac realize that something must have changed on the surface. He suspected that there must have been something like beast hordes completely flooding the mountains as a result of the System making the area of the hunt smaller over time.

There was no way to gain that many points by only hunting cultivators, since there were simply not enough of them to go around. It would also explain why he only lost ten spots in one ladder, but over four hundred in the other. The huge loss in positions only served to make him even more impatient, and it was without hesitation he pushed open the door.

This was already the twentieth day of the hunt, and Zac only had ten days to catch up to those above. However, he did take out the thick shield he got from Thea's bodyguard before stepping inside. He didn't have access to the swirling leaves of **[Nature's Barrier]**, so he would have to make do with a normal tool for protection.

The room he entered was massive, and it almost felt like he entered a grand cathedral carved into the mountain. The roof was over fifty meters above him and held up by massive pillars covered in both reliefs and fractals. Even the walls and the ceiling were the same, both being covered with marvelous pieces of art.

The grandeur felt a bit reminiscent of the Towers of Myriad Dao back on his island, but there was more substance to this place. Zac couldn't help being awed as he slowly walked inside, his eyes drifting to the beautiful engravings.

Zac immediately started formulating ideas of how to somehow swipe this whole place clean. Everything from the small statues placed in various alcoves to the huge pillars supporting the vaulted ceiling felt like a treasure, and Zac didn't want to leave it behind.

But he suddenly stopped in his tracks when his eyes moved to a podium at the other end of the room because he finally realized that he wasn't alone. There was a humanoid sitting in a meditating position on the podium as four braziers lazily burned around him.

He looked mostly human, though he had a third eye in his forehead, forming a vertical slit. He had a long white beard, and it was clear that he was elderly from his appearance. Worse yet, he had already spotted Zac and was looking at him with steady eyes.

"Welcome young... Draugr? Huh? An undead?" the man slowly said with a powerful voice that felt full of wisdom.

Zac sensed no malice from the old man, and it wasn't like he had many other places to go, so he walked closer to the old man. As Zac got closer, he realized that there was not a single ripple of power coming from him, making him wonder just who he was and how he got here.

It was even odder that there was simply no vitality around the old man. When he was in his undead form, he could even see the life in a stalk of grass, but the man in front of him might as well not exist, going by the metric of life force.

There were two possibilities as Zac saw it. The old man might be a

spectral being such as the things in the darkness, since they shouldn't possess any vitality either. The other possibility was that the old man was just an illusion or a projection without any power.

"Hello, I am Zac. Are you a part of the hunt as well?" Zac hesitantly asked after he stopped ten meters away from the platform on which the old man sat.

He wouldn't get any closer than that since there was no telling what sorts of protection were placed around the podium. He couldn't sense anything odd about it, but then again, he had only gained the slightest of insight into discerning oddities in the energy flow.

"What hunt?" the man asked curiously.

Zac wasn't surprised by the answer, and asking that was only a test. He had already seen that the man in front of him didn't possess a ladder position, meaning he wasn't part of the hunt. The fact that the old man didn't pretend to be one of the cultivators from Earth was hopefully a good sign.

He hesitated for a bit before he explained the circumstances of the hunt and the fact that the people participating weren't from this world. The old man looked saddened by the news and, after Zac finished his explanation, gave a deep sigh.

"Such is fate. Over fifty thousand years of struggle, only to be undone by one mistake. To think that we became a trial ground for young, aspiring cultivators. At least our legacy will live on that way, I suppose," the man said, looking up at the ceiling.

"We? Are you part of the Eastern Trigram Sect?" Zac asked.

"I am Anzonil. I, or rather my original body, was once the supreme elder of the Eastern Trigram Sect. Of course, I am long dead along with my fellow sect members," the old man said with a slight shake of his head.

Zac's brows rose at that explanation.

"Um, sorry, how are you still here, then? I know you are not undead," Zac couldn't help asking.

"I couldn't help being a bit selfish in the end. I cut off part of my soul and imbued it into the arrays of these hidden chambers. I did not want my eight thousand years of cultivation to amount to nothing, so I left my imprint and my Heritage here," Anzonil said as he looked down at Zac. "But who would have guessed that the one who came was an undead warrior rather than an Array Master. The Boundless Heavens truly have a sense of humor. I am not sure if what I've left behind would be of much use to you."

If Zac had had a heartbeat in his undead form, it would have sped up at the mention of a Heritage. It indicated that he'd somehow found himself at the location of the inheritance of the supreme elder of the Eastern Trigram Sect. Whatever treasures were hidden here should be among the greatest of the whole Eastern Trigram Sect.

Supreme elders were usually the main powerhouses of a sect. Zac initially thought that the Sect Leader was the strongest guy around, but that apparently wasn't the case. Being a Sect Leader was a highly administrative position, leaving little time for personal cultivation.

But the grand and supreme elders were the hidden forces of a sect, and they were generally in perpetual seclusion or traveling in disguise, working on breaking through their limits. They would only come out when the sect was facing extreme danger that the normal elders couldn't handle, and they were the main deterrence against attacks.

Most of the Multiverse wasn't like Earth. There were no ladders that showed who was alive and who died. A particularly strong elder might even be able to protect a sect thousands of years after their passing, since the outside world couldn't be sure whether they were dead or if they had made a breakthrough, becoming even more monstrous.

There was no way that such a person didn't have a few supreme treasures stowed away. But Zac frowned after realizing he might not get his hands on those treasures, since he wasn't an Array Master. But Anzonil snorted when he saw the downcast face of Zac.

"Who would have thought that a lofty Draugr would be so hungry for this old man's small trinkets," he said with a smile. "Not to worry, there is a path to my treasure even for those who are not fated to walk the same path as me."

The next moment, two doorways rose from the ground some distance away from them, and both teemed with power. Then the right of the two doorways shuddered, and a shimmering screen appeared in it.

"Two pathways to my inheritance," Anzonil said after throwing a glance at the archways. "The left is a trial of arrays. The trial taker must break through ten increasingly difficult arrays to reach my treasures, and that is the path that is not fated with you."

Zac frowned at that explanation, but he slowly nodded.

"Don't worry, that is best for you as well. Your method of getting out of the Entrapment Array outside was admirable, but there is no way you'd pass further than the second array with that kind of brute force. You'd be stuck

forever inside,” the old man said.

“What about the second path?” Zac probed.

“The second path is a path of carnage. To reach my treasure, you need to fight your way through a sea of monsters. This path is far more dangerous, but if you want my treasures without being proficient in arrays, you’ll have to take some risks,” Anzonil explained.

Zac’s eyes lit up, since this was exactly what he was looking for, treasures and things to kill. But he still hesitated whether he should take on the trial rather than asking to be sent outside. If the enemies were the specters, he would be in trouble, since he wasn’t able to kill them. And they were far beneath the mountains now; who knew how many of them were prowling these depths.

There was a limit to how long he could resist their onslaught if it was the same as during the first time darkness descended. But Zac didn’t have the opportunity to voice his concerns, as an unseen force suddenly lifted him into the air and threw him into the shimmering portal.

“Good luck, young Draugr. Prevail in the depths for this old man. Show me why they call yours the royal bloodline.” The elderly voice reached Zac’s ears before his vision turned black.

MYSTIC GARDEN

“Remember, this array will only keep the entrance stable temporarily. You need to get out of there within a week, or you’ll be stuck until Lord Atwood can get you out,” Alea said as she looked down at the array that kept the spatial tears in check.

“I know,” Ogras muttered. “Your boyfriend had better have collected a war hoard’s worth of loot. I’m becoming destitute over here.”

Alea only glared angrily at Ogras in response, making him snicker in glee.

“Well, I’m off,” he said as he stepped into the transportation array leading into the Mystic Realm.

Ogras’ sight was blocked by darkness for a minute until he suddenly was in a shrouded area. His feet barely had time to land on the ground before he melded into the darkness, disappearing from sight.

After he hid himself, he took a quick look around, trying to discern what type of realm he had entered. There were many types of Mystic Realms, but they were generally split into two categories: Wild and Cultivated Realms.

Wild Realms were pocket dimensions untouched by man. Sometimes they were just large deserts devoid of anything of value, but other times, they were like primordial forests teeming with life. If it was the latter, there was a high possibility of finding natural treasures. Of course, where there were treasures, there were often beasts as well.

Cultivated Realms were pockets of space that had either been cut off from the main dimension, grown one way or another, or were Wild Realms turned into residences by powerful warriors. These were generally extra sought after since ruins of high-grade civilizations could contain tremendous amounts of

treasure without the high risk of the Wild Realms.

But unfortunately, he saw that he found himself in a cavern rather than some ancient ruins, and when he discreetly exited to the mouth, he only saw a forest in the distance. However, Ogras didn't exit the cavern, since there were a few things odd with the view.

The first odd thing was the silver lines up in the sky. The sky was like a mix of his own home world's red and Earth's blue, having a deep purple color. But where there should have been clouds or stars, there were instead long crisscrossing silver lines stretching all along the horizon.

Ogras couldn't make heads or tails of the things, but judging by how it looked, the lines must be enormous, spanning tens of kilometers. He had also never heard of anything like that forming naturally, which indicated this place might actually be a cultivated land, even though it lacked structures.

The second odd thing about the outside was the trees. They were large and had an abundance of branches, each being veritably filled with leaves. Ogras could barely see the trunks due to the thick growth on them.

But something was wrong about the trees. He could barely see any movement, and his senses just told him something was off. At first, he thought they were illusions, but he soon realized that wasn't it. The reason the trees felt odd was that they were *huge*. He couldn't be sure from this distance, but he was sure that they were all at least hundreds of meters tall, perhaps even larger.

His heartbeat sped up in anticipation when he saw the titanic trees. The silver streaks in the sky were troubling, but the trees gave him high hopes. The atmosphere was teeming with Cosmic Energy, and vegetation seldom grew so big without Nexus Veins in the ground beneath. Both were indicators of there being a lot of natural treasures around.

However, when there was this much energy, there was also seldom just flora. Judging by the intensity of the energy, it was a real possibility of there being top-tier E-grade beasts around, perhaps even a D-grade alpha at the top.

Greed was battling with fear in his heart as he hid in the shadows, looking for anything that might pose a threat to him. Ogras knew that he had led a pretty cushy existence for most of his life. All his cultivation resources had been given to him or bought at auction, and he hadn't ever really risked his life apart from the all-out battle with that cultist who cost him his hand.

Exploring a Mystic Realm was to risk everything, and it wasn't something he was used to. But soon he gritted his teeth and moved forward,

quickly descending the small hill his cave was hidden inside. He already knew that he needed to earn some achievements if he ever wanted to push through his bottleneck.

After he'd descended the mountain, he found himself in a vast field, though it might as well be called a forest. The blades of grass reached over three meters into the air, almost completely obscuring his vision. Ogras' spear was already in his hand as he walked toward the forest, his eyes darting every which way to avoid an ambush.

It was at times like these he wished that he had the monstrous Luck that Zac must possess. His 37 Luck wasn't bad, but it clearly wasn't enough to get those warnings signals that Zac seemed to get during battles. He was forced to rely on his senses and his mind instead.

He therefore immediately melded into shadows the second he heard a slight rustle from his left, and the next moment, a black shape flew straight past him with enough speed to be a blur. The attacker landed ten meters away, and Ogras saw it was a completely unknown being.

It had six long and thin legs that were roughly a meter long. Each had three joints, and like the rest of the thing, they were covered in short brown fur. The body was extremely elongated, and it was almost four meters long, with its torso being extremely thin. It was almost like a snake had gotten insect legs.

Its head was extremely odd as well, with just a large hole in its face with rows and rows of small fangs. There were also six small black beads that Ogras assumed were the eyes. The thing was built for speed, but the rest was so odd that he couldn't place the thing at all, so Ogras quickly used **[Omniscient Eye]** on it.

Ocodon Worm.

Level: 73

Most used skill: Wind walk

Highest Attribute: Dexterity

Ogras was shocked that the thing was neither some mammal nor even a legged snake. Instead, it was some sort of worm. For a second, Ogras wondered if the Ruthless Heavens had gotten drunk and misnamed the thing in front of him. But then again, the isolated nature of Mystic Realms sometimes made beasts evolve in unconventional directions over the eons.

Knowing the thing was only level 73, he didn't hesitate anymore, and multiple shadow spears struck out at it. It clearly wasn't prepared to be attacked by its own shadow, but its speed was spectacular. It displaced itself in an instant, causing air to swirl around its legs.

But if there was one thing that Ogras excelled at, it was his speed, and soon the running worm was lying dead on the ground, filled with puncture wounds. Ogras quickly dissected it to look for any poison sacs or other hidden threats or valuables, but there seemed to be no such things. He quickly threw the odd corpse in his Cosmos Sack and hurried toward the forest.

As he traveled through the field of overgrown grass, he also kept his eyes peeled for any hidden herbs, but as he ran, he had to admit that the flora was unusually cohesive. There was only a single type of plant, the high swaying grass. There were no flowers, no roots, no vegetables, not even any weeds.

He encountered a few more of the worms as well, but since he understood them better, he had no problems in making short work of them. He was also curious to note that they still seemed to live underground, even though they had grown legs. One of them came straight out of the ground to attack him, its legs folded around its thin body.

Yet there were no other beasts Ogras encountered as he finally entered the forest. The trees were truly humongous; as he walked below their crowns, he knew they were around three hundred meters tall. Their trunks were also extremely thick, and Ogras judged they had a diameter of twenty meters or so.

Ogras had never seen trees like these before. Usually, trees of this size only had leaves and branches far up in the sky, but these ones had branches starting just a few meters up in the air. Ogras could even easily jump up to the branches if he wanted, though he was more interested in walking the forest floor in search of valuable herbs.

He was soon disappointed because there was simply no undergrowth in this forest. What was even odder was that there seemed to be a precise distance between the trees, making them form long, even lines. It truly looked like this forest had been planted by someone, but why would someone want to grow these things?

Finally, Ogras climbed all the way to the top of one of the trees in search of answers. As he climbed, he looked for anything of note that would make these humongous trees worth planting. But no fruits or flowers were growing on the tree, and nothing was living in the trees that might be worth money

either.

He did, however, see something that he hadn't noticed when he stood in the cavern earlier. There was a wall. A huge silver wall that stood beyond the forest, stretching almost as far as his eyes could see.

As he gazed around him, Ogras started to understand that he might actually be in an enclosed space rather than a wild forest. The vantage of the tree allowed him to get a better understanding of the area than what he could see earlier from his starting point.

He was in a circular space that was mostly occupied by the evenly planted forest, with a large field in the middle filled with grass. The only oddity was the dirt hill roughly in the middle of the field, and Ogras guessed it was caused by the spatial distortions of the weakened dimensional membrane.

Perhaps the whole field had been filled with trees once upon a time, but spatial tears had destroyed everything and caused the forest in the middle to be replaced by the grassy plains instead. Ogras also guessed that the silver wall stretched all around the forest, but unfortunately, he couldn't see what lay beyond since the walls and the trees were roughly the same height.

He could also finally see that the odd silver lines in the sky were connected to the wall and formed somewhat of a dome that covered the whole space. Ogras truly couldn't make heads or tails of the situation, which was a bit disconcerting. Since he couldn't understand the purpose of this place or the lines, he also couldn't assess the amount of danger he was in.

It started to feel like he stood in an enormous garden, but why was nothing of value planted? These trees were huge, and their wood might make decent timber, but that was about it. The density of Cosmic Energy would be able to support far more valuable things, so it felt like a waste of effort to create something like this.

Ogras quickly started to climb down the tree before he set out toward the wall in the distance. It took him thirty minutes to get through the rest of the forest before he finally saw the end of the tree line, so he hesitantly stopped by one of the trees.

There were no signs of life around the wall, and there were no roads or gates either. The surface of the wall was completely smooth, and it seemed it was made out of some metal. There also was a row of fractals running along the middle of the wall, and fractals seemed to stretch along the whole thing.

Ogras tried to discern the function of the fractals for thirty minutes, but they were completely unknown to him. But as far as he could tell, they

weren't part of a slaughter array. Besides, few people would leave the fractals for a defensive or offensive array visible, since it would make them far easier to break.

Finally, he took a deep breath and flashed forward, blending with the shadows until he reached the wall. There were no alarms or incoming attacks, only the eerie silence of the forest. The wall was cold to the touch, and after testing it out, Ogras realized it was shockingly durable.

He couldn't identify the type of metal, but judging by the hardness, it was a material or alloy that should be at least E-grade just judging by its strength. His eyes glanced sideways and saw the wall stretch into the distance.

The enclosed forest was so large that he could barely discern the curvature of the wall. The scale of it all was mindboggling. Even if the wall was only a sheet a few centimeters thick, the amount of E-grade material required to build the wall was staggering. He couldn't even calculate the cost of such a thing.

Both Port Atwood and Clan Azh'Rezak would turn destitute after only erecting a portion of this wall, and its only function was to enclose this seemingly unimportant forest. Just dismantling the wall would make him a fortune. But more importantly, who could afford this sort of extravagant spending, and what was there outside the wall?

Just what kind of place was this?

MYSTIC STRUCTURE

Ogras hesitantly looked around for a bit, unsure what to do next. This wasn't the type of the Mystic Realm he'd expected. He had imagined either a wild environment where his skills were put to the test against an onslaught of beasts or an ancient ruin containing a title-awarding trial or something equally valuable.

But there was no danger and nothing to explore, only a forest and a wall. He tried climbing the wall to pass it, but he simply couldn't get up. It was completely sheer, giving him no purchase. He tried stabbing the wall with knives in order to climb, but they only left a scratch mark that immediately disappeared.

He did manage to use his spear to impale the wall, but his weapon was almost immediately pushed out, and the wall repaired itself in an instant. Ogras looked up at the shimmering fractals above, realizing that at least part of their purpose was to maintain the enclosure. Out of better options, he started walking along the wall, hoping to find anything different about it.

Ogras wasn't ready to head back just yet. He'd paid almost 50 million Nexus Coins to stabilize the rift for a week, and he refused to return empty-handed. He would rather spend a week cutting down these humongous trees and at least sell them as timber.

They didn't seem to be E-grade trees, but at least they didn't seem to be mortal grade since there was some spirituality in the huge things. And even if they were only F-grade, there was an enormous quantity, which would hopefully allow him to make a return on his investment.

But before he resigned himself to becoming a lumberjack, he wanted to see if there was any exit in the wall. If someone created this area, there

should be a way to get in and out. Since he'd only spent an hour or so inside the Mystic Realm, he had all the time in the world to check things out before he needed to get back.

The minutes passed as Ogras slogged along the wall, and his surroundings were so uniform that he started to wonder if he was stuck inside a loop of some illusion array. Half his field of view was the blank silver of the wall, and the other half was the lush green of the towering trees. The purple sky was barely visible through the thick canopy of the trees that stretched toward the wall.

But finally, his stubbornness was rewarded, as he spotted a change in the wall in the distance. Ogras sped up with excitement, turning into a hazy blur as he melded with the shadows. Two minutes later, he stood in front of a gate reaching roughly six meters into the air.

It was wrought of the same material as the wall itself and consisted of two doors. But there was no handle, and no matter how hard he pushed or tried to separate the two doors, he couldn't budge them even the slightest. Ogras even jammed his spear into the slit between the doors to use as a crowbar, but it was for nothing.

He clearly had no way to brute-force this thing open, which left only one more thing to try. To the right side of the door roughly three meters up was something that looked a bit like the so-called tablets that the humans of Earth had invented. Either that or a small TV, since it was somewhere in between the two in size.

Ogras stabbed his spear into the ground and leaped up to stand on top of the hilt to get a better view of the thing. The square tablet was roughly as large as his torso, but there were no lights or inscriptions on it, making it almost seem like a nonfunctional decoration.

There was nothing else sticking out around the gate, so Ogras hesitantly touched the screen to "wake it up" in case it worked like the human tablets. To his shock, it worked, and a row of unfamiliar scripts appeared on the screen. Ogras was elated, but next, a voice appeared out of nowhere, making Ogras quickly look around.

[Signature not recognized.]

Ogras' brows rose in alarm, and he immediately pushed away from the door, gripping his spear as he looked around. Was there a Tool Spirit

controlling this place? If so, he might just have made a huge blunder and drawn its attention. It seemed he had been recognized as an intruder.

[Caretaker Signature added. Tier-3 Access Added.]

“Caretaker?” Ogras muttered in confusion. “Hello, who’s there?”

However, there was no response to his question; only silence. The screen up in the air had also dimmed down, returning to its passive state. Ogras hesitated about what to do. Go back and get reinforcements or keep trying to open the door? Since this seemed like something technological in nature, it was perhaps a better idea to go and get a few humans and a couple of craftsmen.

Curiosity pushed him forward, and he once again approached the door. But this time, the doors soundlessly slid open, giving access to a large room on the other side. Ogras’ brows furrowed in confusion, and he hesitated whether he should go inside.

The voice said that his signature first wasn’t recognized; then it added a caretaker. Had the Tool Spirit for the door mistaken him for someone in charge of tending the trees? And what was Tier-3 Access? Would it let him return again if he walked inside the doorway and it closed shut?

“Nothing ventured, nothing gained,” Ogras muttered as he tightened his grip on his spear, heading inside the door. “Worst case scenario I will have to wait for Zac to come and smash through this thing.”

The other side of the wall didn’t lead to the outdoors, but he rather found himself inside a large room that seemed to be used for storage. Both the walls and roof were made of the silver metal as well, and there wasn’t much else of note inside. The same type of fractals also ran all across the upper walls, making a loop around the room.

The room itself was lit with crystals, indicating energy arrays were running through the walls. The crystals wouldn’t be able to work by themselves, since there were clear signs no one had been here for a very long time. There were also a few crates that were falling apart in one corner, shrunken nuts having spilled out of them across the floor.

Ogras guessed the nuts were used to plant those huge trees outside, but the seeds seemed to have dried out long ago, and he doubted whether they would be able to be planted anymore. Still, he had ample space in his Cosmos Sack, so he put the crates inside as he looked around.

There was also a table and a chair, both made out of metal. The size of them were much too large for Ogras, just like the gate. Judging by how that tablet was placed and the size of the furniture, Ogras estimated the creators of this place to reach roughly four to five meters into the air.

Not many species were that large, at least not amongst the more populous races. There were a few golem, demon, and beastmen species that were that tall, but Ogras saw nothing that indicated any specific species inside this thing.

On the other side of the room was another gate much like the one he'd just passed through. But before he headed over, he first went back to the original gate, and he was relieved to see that it noiselessly slid open upon his approach.

Ogras headed over to the other side, and this one also opened without having to touch the tablet up in the air. An enormous corridor stood on the other side, and Ogras hesitantly walked outside. The corridor was made from the same material as well, and Ogras started to feel they must have dismantled a whole mountain to get this much material.

A few tubes ran along the roof in the corridor, and the whole thing reminded Ogras of those Technomancer movies that he had watched when he was free. They had taken place in societies where there was no Cosmic Energy, but technology had reached far beyond Earth's current capabilities, and they even explored the Multiverse.

But there were also signs that this was not a Technocrat stronghold. The corridor was illuminated with crystals rather than electrical lamps, and Ogras was pretty sure that the Technomancers did not use fractals for their bases. They relied on the so-called Dao of Technology, and that concept did not use fractals or inscriptions.

The design made him rather veer toward some sort of artificial beings, such as the Creators or another golemoid race. They often liked this type of lifeless interior, whereas demons or beastkin favored more nature in their surroundings.

Ogras was once again shocked by the sheer size of the complex he found himself inside. Had the whole Mystic Realm been turned into some sort of base? He found himself walking for hours, and he had found six more gardens, each of them planted with the same trees.

It was also quickly becoming clear that the Cosmic Energy had somehow been concentrated into these gardens, since the energy outside could at best

be the equivalent of a low-tier E-grade planet. But why use all the energy in the Mystic Realm for some trees?

But apart from that, there was nothing of note. Most of the corridors were empty, creating a network that spanned around these huge circular areas with the trees. He had found a few rooms that seemed to be barracks, with rows of huge bunk beds lined up.

But there was no sign of them having been inhabited, since there were no remains or signs of use. There was just a thick layer of dust on the mattresses, while the walls and floor were spotless. Ogras had a feeling it had something to do with the inscriptions running along the walls. They seemed to perform a variety of maintenance functions, from repairs to self-cleaning, much like the arrays on equipment.

But finally, he reached a gate that was different from the others. It looked the same, but it did not automatically open like those he'd passed before. Ogras leaped up and grabbed hold of the tablet, and with a buzz, it lit up.

[Tier-3 Access Signature. Access granted.]

It was the same voice as before, and the next moment, the gate slowly slid open. Ogras noted with some interest that this one was far thicker than the others, reaching almost a meter in thickness. But his attention was quickly drawn to the outside because it almost felt like he'd entered a different world.

There was the same type of corridors as before, but these ones were caked in grime and what Ogras could only assume was dried blood. There were signs of battle everywhere, with ruined pipes and scarred walls. Only a few illuminating crystals still worked, and the light they gave off was far weaker compared to the corridors earlier.

Ogras' eyes quickly turned to the fractals up in the air, but he noted that they didn't give off any light or energy as they did in the corridors he had passed earlier. Was the Cosmic Energy network ruined in this part of the structure? And what kind of battle had taken place here? And why was the earlier section unaffected by whatever had happened here?

The signs of battle were a clear indicator that this place was inhabited, or at least had been not too long ago. Ogras quickly shrouded himself in shadows as he started proceeding along the wall after making sure he could enter the thicker gate again.

As he walked, there were signs of disrepair everywhere, and there were

even signs of someone having stripped parts of the walls for materials. His eyes darted back and forth as he kept walking through the oppressive paths. They were as large as those before, but somehow they felt far more claustrophobic.

A sudden sound of metal striking metal echoed out in the distance, and Ogras pushed himself to the wall, completely blending with the darkness under a broken illumination crystal. As he kept listening, he heard the sounds repeating, and he immediately realized it was the sound of battle. His heartbeat sped up in fear-mixed anticipation; he wasn't alone.

Since he couldn't sense any too strong energies from the direction of the ruckus, he slowly crept forward, and he finally reached a shrouded corner that gave him a vantage of what was going on around the corner where the sounds came from.

Two warriors of different species were in a desperate fight for their lives. One of them was a human, and the other was of a beastkin origin, looking a bit like a werewolf. The sounds Ogras had heard earlier had come from the clash between the wolfman's claws and the human's sword. Since they were stuck in the tunnel, they couldn't completely maneuver as they wished, but they were clearly used to battle in this type of confined space.

They used both the walls and the ceiling as footholds as they clashed over and over, each clash resulting in a shockwave that told Ogras that they were either weak E-grade warriors or somewhat strong F-grade warriors. Ogras was considering whether he should throw his hat into the ring when the wolf suddenly disappeared after being pushed back from a clash with the human's sword.

The next moment, the beastkin was right in front of Ogras, and a searing pain erupted in his face. Ogras' face contorted in pain and anger, and the metallic mold on his arms cracked as a pitch-black hand reached for the werewolf. The werewolf quickly reacted and pushed away, but the hand extended beyond what was normal and gripped the throat of the wolf.

The sinister claws of the werewolf tried to cut the hand right off, but they powerlessly went straight through, and then a crunch echoed out through the tunnels as Ogras crushed the neck of his attacker. The eyes of the human who had stood by in the distance lit up when he saw his enemy die, but before he could speak up, he puked a mouthful of blood.

A large shadow spear had impaled him from behind, and the human fearfully looked at Ogras as he walked over, his eyes glowing in the darkness.

The black arm had lost its form, now only forming a shadowy haze that drifted by his side.

“I have some questions.”

THROUGH THE TUNNELS

Zac glared in the direction from where he was thrown, but there was nothing there apart from a rough rock wall. There wasn't any sign of the portal or the elaborate chambers of Anzonil, and he might as well be in any random cavern of a mountain.

Zac sighed in disappointment as he got to his feet. There were a lot of topics that he wanted to broach with the old man, even if he decided to undergo the trial. But perhaps staying in corporeal form as an Array Spirit required a lot of energy or something, forcing the old man to send Zac away quickly.

He really wanted to know just what the darkness was, and if Anzonil knew of the method to kill the specters. After speaking with the old man, he had a feeling that the darkness was directly linked with the demise of the Eastern Trigram Sect back in the day.

That the old man knew of the Draugr also piqued his interest, though that wasn't as important at the moment. But it looked like he needed to know more about his undead race since having what was called a royal bloodline might both be a blessing and a curse.

In any case, there wasn't much to do here. He was currently in a dead end of a subterranean tunnel, and there was only one way to go. The instructions were pretty clear as well: reach the end of the road and you'll get the treasure.

Zac kept the shield fastened to his left arm, hefting **[Verun's Bite]** in the other as he started to walk down the winding path. There were no crystals giving off light in this place, but the tunnel was thankfully not completely shrouded in darkness.

There was quite a high density of Cosmic Energy in the tunnel, which

sustained some of the glowing moss that also grew in his own mountain. It was amazing to Zac how plants learned to live only off of Cosmic Energy and could survive even in the most desolate places with only that as a source of sustenance. But in Zac's undead form, the high density of energy wasn't a blessing, but rather a curse.

The more Cosmic Energy in the atmosphere, the worse it felt, and here it was like the very air around him was trying to destroy him. Usually, the ambient energy in the air wasn't a problem for him, but he guessed that he was either inside a gathering array or close to a Nexus Vein.

It finally got to the point that he took out a couple of his Miasma Crystals and stuffed them inside his robe to feel the cold energies within against his skin. It helped a bit, and it was with relief he sensed that the density of energy around him was quickly decreasing as he walked further along the path.

However, it wasn't all good news, since he once again started to sense the insidious energy of the darkness, though it still was minute. But Zac still kept going forward. He wouldn't give up his chance at supreme treasure just because of a hint of the malicious energy, and he strode forward with purpose until he finally reached the end of the tunnel.

Zac soundlessly advanced the last fifty meters to the exit and peeked out the tunnel. The first thing he noticed was that there was a drop of over fifteen meters down to the floor from his egress. The second thing he saw was the sea of rats.

He immediately realized there must be some sort of array that hid his passage and blocked out any sound as he looked down. He gazed upon a chaotic swarm of rats that fought, mated, and scuttled about without him hearing a single sound.

Most of the rats he saw were the very same type that he had already killed throngs of on the surface, but he realized that he had likely only fought the weakest of the brood so far. There were far larger rats lumbering about as well, a few of which emanated enough power that they might be E-grade, though barely.

Zac's eyes lit up at the veritable feast of prey, but he slowly observed everything for another full fifteen minutes before moving. He wanted to see if there was something like a rat king that could be a threat, but if there was, it didn't live in this large cavern.

He mouthed a silent prayer before jumping down, but he didn't try to conceal his presence. On the contrary, he entered the huge cavern with a roar,

slamming down tens of meters away from the exit with a huge crash.

He had imbued himself with the Dao of Heaviness, and he was like a ten-ton hammer when he landed, killing every rat within over ten meters and creating a large crater. The moment he had exited the passage, he had been inundated by a cacophony of screeches and hisses, and it got a lot worse after he made his entrance.

Zac didn't even have time to get to his feet before he received a surge of energy into his forehead, and he immediately understood that he had accomplished his goal. The quest for his second skill, **[Fields of Despair]**, was finished. It required him to draw the ire of over a thousand enemies simultaneously, and he had likely passed that goal ten times over with his flashy entrance.

He didn't really know whether to be happy or angry that there wasn't an accompanying Dao Vision to go along with his newly acquired skill. He remembered very well the feeling when he'd killed the thousand barghest required to complete his quest for **[Axe Mastery]**.

Completing the quest had formed the axe fractal in his chest, but it was missing in his undead form just like the normal skills. When he had focused on it, he had been brought to the desolate world with the enormous axe. Meanwhile, his new skill only added a pure skill fractal on his forehead.

It was a welcome boost to his very limited repertoire in his Draugr form, and he had just the perfect stage to test his new ability. But he was beset by frenzied rats before he even had time to form a battle plan.

However, while most of the rats down in the cave were larger than their brethren on the surface, they were of no threat to Zac. After a few quick swings with his axe, thirty corpses lay strewn around him. Zac frowned as he looked down at his axe and, after a brief pause, decided to stash the axe into his sack.

He didn't want to rely on combat skills he gained with his other class too much since that might negatively impact the growth of his Undying Bulwark class. Instead, he decided to fight using the means his class provided for as long as possible, only relying on his axe and his Daos if needed.

The first thing he did was to unleash **[Fields of Despair]**, and the space around him actually changed a bit. It was as though the world had gone monochrome within fifty meters from his position, and it reminded him of how it had looked when he fought the Corpse Lord.

In fact, he noticed that the Cosmic Energy around him was actually

turning into Miasma at a visible rate, and a mist of the deathly energy swirled around him. However, the production came at a cost of his own energy, so the skill wouldn't be very useful for cultivation.

However, that wasn't the point of the skill, and Zac was elated after having figured out the workings of it. It was a debuffing skill with a large area, and its effect was pretty great.

It lowered the attributes of his enemies by a certain degree across the board. After turning it off and on again while fighting with the rats for a minute, he estimated the number to be around 10%.

Taking away 10% of the fighting power of all close-by enemies wasn't a huge amount, but it wasn't bad. Besides, the skill was only at Early stage, and it already had many uses.

For example, it could negate almost half of the effect of skills like his **[Hatchetman's Rage]** without having any of the other skill's disadvantages. It could also lower the power of an ultimate attack from his enemies by a decent degree, increasing his survivability.

There was a pretty big drawback to this skill. **[Fields of Despair]** didn't have a great synergy with his other skill, **[Deathwish]**. To kill his enemies, he needed to get hit, and the harder he got hit, the more damage he returned. If he restricted the power of his enemies, he would also restrict his offensive power.

Then again, the two skills were used in different ways, and he wasn't surprised that Undying Bulwark's skills sacrificed offensive power in favor of more defense. It was a tank class after all. But these many defensive measures weren't needed against rats, even if there was a seemingly endless horde of them.

But before he deactivated **[Fields of Despair]**, he noticed another huge advantage of the skill. As he had experimented for a bit with the skill, there lay a new slew of rat carcasses around him, and those that died first were starting to emit a turquoise mist.

Zac immediately realized it was Miasma, and he didn't shy away when the mists were drawn toward him as though they were guided. The energy effortlessly merged with his existing stores of Miasma, giving him back even more energy than he used when killing the rats.

This clearly differed from how it had worked when he'd fought the beasts on Mystic Island. Back then, it worked the same as in his human form. When he killed something, he received a boost of energy that went toward

improving his levels, but the effect on his expended storage of Miasma was minuscule.

This was different. The energy that streamed toward him from more and more corpses didn't help him with his levels, but they restored the Miasma he was continuously expending to power his two skills.

He finally understood the full effect of his new skill, and it truly was a field of despair for his enemies. Not only did it weaken those who came too close, it even restored his energies to allow him to keep fighting for an indefinite time.

He quickly changed his mind about turning the skill off, and instead, he kept both his skills going. Both of them were continuously drawing from his Miasma reserves, but with new rat corpses being added all the time, he quickly restored the energy he expended.

In the end, he lost slightly more energy than he gained from the corpses, but he would fall from lack of sleep before lack of Miasma at this rate. Then again, he was only fighting weak beasts at the moment, as the larger rats hadn't entered the fray yet.

Since he'd already gained one of the skills, he decided to grind out his second one as well, but he soon found out it wasn't as easy as he had hoped. Not all the rats were strong enough to attack him with enough force to progress his quest.

But he quickly found a solution as he took out his axe once again. There was a pretty clear correlation between the power and size of these rats, and he soon found that the rats needed to be at least three meters long to be able to bite or swipe with enough force to award a point of progress in his class.

Everything smaller that approached him was quickly culled with a swipe of his axe, while he kept blocking the attacks of the larger ones with his shield. Some wounds were starting to accumulate on his body since he wasn't able to block all the strikes, but he didn't care, since his high Endurance and Vitality had no problem in keeping him alive.

It didn't take long for him to gain a level since the rats were almost as strong as the beasts on Mystic Island. But the beasts back there had been spread out, each occupying its own territory. Here they were everywhere, and no matter where Zac looked, he saw a sea of experience points approaching him.

It was also clear that these beasts had no intention of backing down, even after hundreds of their kin lay lifeless on the floor. Zac soon realized that it

might be because they were affected by the darkness.

He didn't believe all these animals were possessed like what had happened to some cultivators up on the surface. The energies of the darkness had rather slowly seeped into their minds while they lived underground, increasing their aggression.

But Zac didn't mind, and he soon settled into a familiar routine ingrained into his bones from the beast waves. He was already quickly climbing on the Hunter Ladder again, even though he mainly focused on progressing the quest for **[Bulwark Mastery]**.

The moment he blocked the final attack with his shield, he felt a huge surge of energy in his heart. It didn't kick-start it to start beating, even in his undead form, but it was rather that something occupied its empty chambers. Zac couldn't stop a wide smile from spreading on his face when he realized what it was.

It was another Dao Fractal, just like the tree or the axe in his Hatchetman form. But he didn't dare to check the form or nature of the fractal any closer, since he was afraid he'd get sucked inside a vision while there was a sea of rats still rampaging around him.

He was extremely impatient to end the fight so that he could gain his fourth Dao Seed, so he no longer held anything back or cared about fighting with his shield only. He became a whirlwind of carnage as he rampaged across the enormous den, and soon the elated growls from **[Verun's Bite]** overpowered the screeches of the frenzied rats.

EVOLUTION

No matter where Zac looked, he was met with a frenzied onslaught of sharp teeth and claws, and he didn't even need to aim as he methodically swung his axe. He was long since drenched in gore and viscera, his two black orbs of eyes glimmering with finality as he kept killing rats by the score.

The area around him was like another world, with turquoise mists wafting about, and an enduring desolation had taken hold of the den of the rats. A slow whirlwind of Miasma had formed around Zac by now, continuously imbuing him with energy.

The rats were truly relentless and had no regard for their own lives and kept desperately trying to tear Zac apart. As the sizes of the rats surrounding him grew, the wounds on his body got worse as well.

Zac blocked one strike after another, and even his sturdy shield was starting to show signs of wear from innumerable claws slamming into it. But he couldn't put it away. Zac could not clear a large number of critters at once since he didn't have access to **[Chop]**, so he needed something to stave off some of the rats while he cut others down.

But Zac had no plans to switch his class to Hatchetman. First of all, he didn't have the luxury to pass out for a couple of minutes mid-battle, but even if he did, he didn't want to let go of this opportunity. He hadn't encountered this great a leveling experience even during the beast waves, and after another two hours of fighting, he gained another level.

Besides, **[Verun's Bite]** wasn't the only thing doing the work. All around him, particularly behind him, ghastly specters of rats kept popping out from nowhere, maiming and killing their living twins. It was **[Deathwish]** with its damage reflection that was dishing back far more than he got hurt.

It was just three hours and one level later that only six rats and Zac remained. The rest of the burrow was covered with thousands of rat corpses, and it was impossible to take a single step without stepping in a pool of blood.

The remaining rats were the six largest specimens in the cave, the ones that Zac had suspected might be E-grade earlier. Now that they were right in front of him, he realized that it likely only was true for two of them, whereas the other four were very close to that stage.

However, it was clear to Zac that even the four lesser rats in front of him were different from the mindless hordes that had swarmed him the past hours. They had silently observed Zac from a distance, making no move to approach him. Each of them was enormous, the smallest of them at least as large as an elephant. The largest rats, one of the two that Zac suspected to be E-grade, was at least eight meters long, with its tail adding just as much length.

Zac was panting as he stood and observed the last remaining rats as well, welcoming the opportunity to take a breather. He was completely caked in blood from the fight, and he thanked the stars he was in his undead form.

His sense of smell was a bit different, mainly smelling life rather than other scents, and he could only imagine that the stench of thousands of dead rats was beyond putrid to a human. Apart from the blood and gore, he was also marred with tens of wounds that dripped some of the black ichor that sat in his veins instead of blood.

It was from this fight that he understood the function of the black substance. He had thought it was just a remnant of the blood in his human form, but after having lost a pint of the stuff, he realized that wasn't the case.

The black ichor wasn't just putrefied blood, but it was also needed for the storage of Miasma somehow. The more of the stuff he lost during the fight, the less Miasma he was able to store in his body.

That meant if he was bled completely dry of the ichor, he would probably turn back into his human form, whereas a real undead would die. Of course, simply expelling all the Miasma was a far simpler method than draining himself of his blood.

Suddenly, two of the rats started to move, clearly trying to flank him. With rats this powerful, Zac wasn't comfortable letting them attack him from behind, so he instantly hurled his axe with a grunt, imbuing it with the Dao of Sharpness.

The axe ripped through the air and slammed straight into the head of one

of the rats, instantly killing it. A huge surge of energy entered Zac, far higher than he had gotten from anything before, immediately giving him another level.

These things were clearly superior compared to their brethren, judging by how much energy they rewarded, and Zac was relieved he'd managed to down one with a surprise attack. He had held back on using his Daos apart from his initial entrance since he wanted to keep some cards for this fight.

He immediately pushed forward, aiming to retrieve his weapon, but one of the rats moved to intercept with a screech. But Zac held nothing back as he imbued his fist with the Dao of Heaviness, slamming it straight into the temple of the rat before it managed to bite into his torso.

A loud crack could be heard, and another surge of energy entered him, but he didn't stop as he ran toward his axe and ripped it out of the head of the rat. Suddenly, a sense of danger erupted in his mind, and he threw himself forward without hesitation.

A sharp swish could be heard right behind him, and he looked to see one of the E-grade rats having appeared right behind him somehow. It had attacked with its claws, but Zac also sensed the familiar feeling of the Dao of Sharpness.

The corpse of the rat he'd killed with his axe was cleanly split into four parts from the swipe of the rat, and even the ground for the following ten meters had four deep gouges from the attack. Zac frowned at the large scars from the claws since it showed that its attack was a bit similar to those of the fiend wolf.

He didn't have time to formulate a plan, as he was suddenly shrouded in darkness. His brows rose in alarm, but he didn't have time to do anything but turn around as he was met with the huge maw of the other E-grade rat.

But it didn't try to bite him; instead, Zac was drowned in a deluge of bile. Zac was disgusted by it, but some puke wasn't enough to do him in. He immediately moved out of the stream of the putrid liquid, and with a roar, swung **[Verun's Bite]** straight at the stretched-out throat of the rat.

The puking rat seemed surprised to be attacked for some reason, and it barely had time to register the incoming swing before it was almost fully decapitated by the powerful strike of the axe. Zac's axe hummed in glee as large amounts of blood flowed into it as the huge corpse fell onto the ground with a thump.

The next moment, the familiar Tool Spirit emerged from the axe, and it

immediately leaped at one of the rats who had jumped at Zac from behind. It was clearly an uneven fight since the rat wasn't able to target the spectral being, and in just a few seconds, it lay dead on the ground.

Zac couldn't help staring down at the E-grade beast with some confusion. Its attack had been truly perplexing. But a sizzling sound quickly told him what was going on. A dozen rat carcasses had also been inundated by the huge torrent of puke, and they had turned into nothing but pools of goop in just seconds.

Even the floor was melting at a visible rate, and Zac's brows rose in alarm as he looked down at himself. To his surprise, he saw that he was completely fine, even though his robe was slowly disintegrating. The liquid simply sloughed off his pale skin without leaving so much as a mark.

Zac apparently was immune to the attack, which the rat hadn't expected. That had given him the opportunity for an easy kill while it tried to register what was going on. But Zac didn't have time to ponder on why the poisonous bile didn't affect him, as the other E-grade rat was already upon him with an enraged screech.

It frenziedly swiped at him in an all-out effort to rip him to shreds, forcing him on the defensive for the time being. He had already infused his axe with the Dao of Sharpness as he tried to cut off its arms, but the rat was extremely quick to intercept his axe with its claws.

The claws were truly sturdy, and even after tens of clashes, there wasn't a single mark on them. Zac was at a standstill since he didn't have any stronger attacks to use. He didn't dare use **[Deathwish]** against this opponent since he wasn't sure whether he could actually take that much damage.

But the stalemate soon changed, as Verun, the Tool Spirit of his axe, was in rare form today. Three rats were remaining after Zac had killed the first E-grade one, but Verun pounced upon the remaining two smaller ones with gleeful abandon.

Less than half a minute later, only Zac's opponent remained, and a great growl echoed through the caverns as the prehistoric beast finally joined Zac in his battle. Zac suddenly changed his Dao Seed to the Dao of Heaviness, and with a growl, he swung with all the force he could bear.

The strike wasn't able to get through the quick defense of the rat, but the enormous weight behind the strike was enough to throw the thing off-balance. Verun knew exactly what to do and bit straight through the throat of the rat, instantly killing it before it had a chance to react. Yet another huge

stream of energy entered Zac as well, pushing him forward at least one level.

However, his Tool Spirit wasn't done there, as it kept ripping the corpse into shreds with frenzied glee. The blood from the beast started to float around the spirit as though it wasn't affected by gravity any longer, creating a macabre spectacle.

The axe in Zac's hand was suddenly vibrating in his hands, and he was barely able to hold on as it tried to fly away and join the spirit. Zac's eyes glistened with anticipation as he let go of the axe, and it quickly flew to the side of the projection of Verun.

An ocean of blood suddenly gushed out of the axe, creating a crimson flood that swirled around the spirit. Zac guessed it was all the blood from the various beasts he had killed that was getting released all at once, forming a small sea of the stuff.

Verun howled with exultation, its roars echoing through the cave with such power that Zac couldn't help worriedly looking around. He had already spotted the path out of here, and he was afraid that the howls would attract even more beasts.

Then again, if nothing had come from hours of screeching and slaughter, then some howls shouldn't bring any calamity to his doorstep either. But Zac grabbed the tail of one of the largest rats and started to drag it toward the only pathway out of here just in case. Soon he'd formed a wall of flesh that completely blocked the entrance.

While he was busy moving the bodies, the storm of blood around his axe had calmed down, and the large sphere of blood kept shrinking as it encased **[Verun's Bite]** within. When the sphere had shrunk from a diameter of ten meters down to three, it started to look like the blood was congealing into a solid.

The transformed blood even turned translucent, and within a few minutes, it looked like his axe was encased in a ruby almost as large as he was. Zac walked over to the crystal with anticipation since he had long realized that his weapon was finally evolving.

ETERNAL AND UNBROKEN

Zac's axe had already been on the verge of taking the next step, and the blood of the largest rats was enough to push it to the next level. Evolutions of this kind were very diverse, and after asking around back in Port Atwood, he learned that there was no cohesive method for the process.

That left him wondering what he should do now. He had no idea how long it would take for the axe to finish its evolution. He also had no idea whether he could put the crystal into his Cosmos Sack, or whether that would interrupt the process.

In the end, he chose to move the crystal to a corner of the large den, hiding it in an alcove behind a couple more carcasses. Luckily, the axe didn't give off any energy emanations during the process, so hiding it didn't require any arrays.

He surveyed the scene for a while, and after some alterations, it was impossible to notice anything was hidden there. Next, he created a second hiding spot and sat down inside. Initially, he hadn't planned on staying in this den, but the evolution of his axe had forced him to change his plans.

But it was just as well. His Miasma wasn't spent from the long battle, but his body was wounded all over, and he had lost quite a bit of ichor. He popped a pill into his mouth and closed his eyes to focus on recuperation, and it was only two hours later he opened them.

He wasn't completely back to top shape, but his Endurance and Vitality had improved him to fighting condition at least. But he still couldn't leave since he had no idea what lay past this cave. There was no guarantee that this was the only thing blocking his path to the treasure, and he wasn't confident about fighting anything too strong without his axe.

However, he wasn't just sitting around while he waited for his axe to get done. He was itching to check out his Dao Fractal, but he held off on that in favor of a few other things first. The intense fight had brought him all the way to level 39, giving a huge boost to his attributes.

Name: Zachary Atwood
Level: 39
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 – High, Seed of Trees – High, Seed of Sharpness – Middle
Core: [F] Duplicity

Strength: 420 [Increase: 55%. Efficiency: 116%]
Dexterity: 221 [Increase: 40%. Efficiency: 116%]
Endurance: 430 [Increase: 60,5%. Efficiency: 116%]
Vitality: 251 [Increase: 50,5%. Efficiency: 116%]
Intelligence: 90 [Increase: 40%. Efficiency: 116%]
Wisdom: 85 [Increase: 40%. Efficiency: 116%]
Luck93 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 116%]

Free Points: 6
Nexus Coins: [F] 53,625,943

Gaining this many levels in just a few hours would have been unthinkable back when he was around this level the first time around, but then again, he was far weaker at that time. He had another six free points to allocate, but he held off on that until he saw what he'd gained from his new Dao Seed.

Next, he opened his quest menu, and as he suspected, there was a new quest waiting for him there. At level 35 Hatchetman, he'd gained the quest for **[Loamwalker]**, and this time around, he got another skill quest as well.

**Immutable Bulwark (Class): Survive the strike of three evolved beings.
Reward: Immutable Bulwark (2/3)**

Zac believed "evolved beings" was referring to E-grade beasts or cultivators, and he felt this quest wasn't very hard since it didn't specify how he should survive it. With the help of Fields of Despair and a shield, he would have no problem blocking a strike from something like the E-grade rat, let alone surviving it, which was proven by two-thirds of the quest already being completed.

As for the skill itself, Zac guessed it was a pure defensive skill, going by the name. He felt it was about time since none of the three initial skills were purely defensive skills like his **[Nature's Barrier]**. In any case, he didn't think it would take long to find out since there clearly were E-grade beasts down here in the tunnels.

Zac got to his feet and walked over to his axe once again, but there was still no response from it. Since he was finally done with what he needed to do, he properly concealed himself and turned his sight inward toward his heart. Just like he expected, a large pocket of space had formed inside his heart, and Zac wasn't very surprised to see that the fractal looked like a large shield. But he didn't have time to inspect it any further, as his vision quickly changed.

The place he was sent to was quite different from the desolation of the dead world of the axe-man. He found himself standing in a beautiful park that was meticulously tended to, and Zac almost forgot why he was here due to the soothing atmosphere.

It truly felt like he was in paradise from the array of beautiful plants and trees forming a harmony that could only be said to be perfect. Even the sky shone with a warm golden luster, and looking up at it, Zac almost felt like he was being caressed by the heavens themselves.

Surprisingly enough, people were walking past him, but it was as though he was a ghost. No one noticed him as they kept going forward. Some even walked straight through him, which was a pretty weird experience.

The people were of varying races, some of them humans, but many were

things that Zac had never heard of. They were also of extremely varying power, ranging from weak mortals to great powerhouses clearly stronger than E-grade. But one thing was the same for each and every one of them. They were all orderly walking in a line, and everyone was holding what looked like a small gift in their hands as they streamed in the same direction.

Curious, Zac followed the train of people and soon found himself in the middle of the garden that held an enormous square made of marble. The moment he entered, he realized he wasn't in a park, but rather a grave site.

In the middle of the square was a mausoleum, and all the people he had followed walked toward it as though they were on a pilgrimage. Zac walked over as well, and soon he stood just twenty meters away from the golden inlaid arch leading inside.

However, no one entered the building; instead, they simply bowed before placing down whatever they had brought in front of the building before turning away and leaving the square.

There were already large mounds of offerings, and interestingly enough, they ranged from simple things like a small wood carving to Nexus Crystals that emitted such immense power that Zac was afraid his soul would shatter just by standing close to them.

He instinctually knew those things were at least C-grade crystals, possibly even higher. He knew that only one of them would be enough to live like a king for thousands of years, yet no one even gave the treasures a second glance before leaving.

Zac's curiosity only grew as he turned his eyes toward the mausoleum. He already knew that his visions came from supreme existences, and he guessed that the one he was about to receive was based on whoever was interred inside.

Zac gave a small bow just like the pilgrims before resolutely walking toward the entrance. As he got closer, he noticed that two old men sat in front of the gate with closed eyes, likely guarding the place. However, the moment he turned his eyes toward them, it was as though his soul was about to be crushed by immense pressure, and he had to quickly look away.

Even though he was just a wisp of consciousness, he had to stop and take a few deep breaths, his hands shaking from the experience. He was shocked to realize that both the old men sitting in front of the mausoleum were far more powerful than Greatest, the strongest person he'd met so far.

Their auras were as immense as a galaxy, and Zac couldn't even get close

to the door due to the passive aura that they emitted. But suddenly, the weight disappeared, and Zac was shocked to see that both the old monsters were looking straight at him.

“Enter, inheritor,” one of the old men said, each of his words echoing with the Dao itself.

Zac was starting to be unsure whether this was actually a vision, or if the System had sent his consciousness to this place. Was it the same with the desolate world only housing the enormous axe back then?

But he felt this wasn't the place to ask, so after bowing once more, he passed by the two old men, who once again closed their eyes. Anticipation was rising as Zac entered the structure. Just how powerful would one have to have been to have cultivators who were at least C-grade sit in vigil over one's grave site?

Zac reverentially held his breath as he looked around the mausoleum, but it was surprisingly simple. The insides were lit up by six braziers that burned along the sides, though interestingly enough, they didn't emit any smoke. Apart from the sources of light, only two more things were housed in the building. The first was a tomb wrought out of the same type of marble the square was made of.

The second was a shield that emitted an immense aura. It was almost shaped like a coffin, and it was mostly unadorned apart from a blue fractal that was the source of the aura. It felt like the shield would be able to protect him even if the sky collapsed, and Zac immediately understood it was a supreme treasure at least at the level of the axe he'd seen in the other vision.

In front of the tomb was a simple plaque that only said three words.

Eternal and Unbroken.

There was no mention of whose resting place this was, or what sort of thing he or she had accomplished. Then again it didn't seem it was necessary, going by the constant stream of pilgrims who found their way here.

After silently looking at the plaque for a minute, Zac finally walked over toward the shield.

Death loomed as he roused himself with some effort. Murky eyes that hadn't opened for tens of thousands of years gazed at the richly decked man kneeling in front of him with a face marred by worries.

"Shield," he said with a raspy voice, and soon after, five men entered from a passage.

Every one of them emitted auras powerful enough to subdue the heavens, but their faces were red with strain as they had to cooperate to carry an object covered in dusty cloth. They finally arrived in front of him, and when they placed down the item, the building shook from the weight.

His decrepit hand slowly reached forward, and the cloth disintegrated as his old companion rose toward him. As he looked at the blue fractal on the shield, he felt as though he were back on the battlefield those millions of years ago, but this time, he didn't fasten it to his arm.

"This is goodbye, old friend," he said with a sigh.

A smile adorned his face as he slowly caressed the edge of his shield, and it hummed with sorrow as he rose to his feet. He walked outside his small palace and rose into the skies, the six generals silently following behind.

Outside the town, a sea of people silently stood waiting, millions upon millions of them.

"Grand Protector," they immediately shouted, kneeling in reverence.

He never had any family, but he saw all these people as his children. He had watched over this world for innumerable years, seeing it grow to the beacon of freedom and enlightenment it was today. He had staved off countless attacks from those who had wanted to take their land and wealth.

But he knew he was needed one final time as he looked up at the skies. The beautiful blue sky was replaced by a dizzying blur of all colors of the spectrum as rampant energies clashed. Most of the smaller worlds had already been destroyed, ripped into nothingness by the primordial chaos.

The death of a universe.

The next moment, his old and hunched-over body released enough power to blot out the skies as he rose to meet the incoming chaos. Space itself was cracking, but he didn't even notice the void edges that pelted his body. They were simply pushed away by the force of his latent will.

In just a second, he left the atmosphere, and he looked down on the massive continent beneath. There had once been tens of thousands of worlds circulating around it, but now only a scant few survived, protected by immense arrays.

“Eternal and unbroken,” he said, his voice carrying across the countless miles.

His body started to shine brighter and brighter, and soon it far eclipsed any star in the universe. The golden shine quickly expanded and formed a shield that encapsulated the whole continent and its trillions of inhabitants.

The next moment, the chaotic energies and spatial tears slammed into the shield with enough power to rip even the Dao to shreds, but the shield didn’t even shudder. His consciousness slowly faded as he became one with the shield.

Countless years passed as the universe faded, the continent set adrift in the chaotic spatial folds between realities. But the shield held true, protecting its inhabitants from the endless void. Forever.

For he was Immutable.

CHAINS OF FATE

Zac sat completely immobile for hours even after the vision ended. He thought that he had gotten accustomed to the new reality by now, but he was once again completely awed by the power some individuals held. Seeing the death of a universe was also something that he would never forget.

The prowess in that golden shield was mind-bending, to the point that Zac felt the Grand Protector was a being that was a notch above both the unnamed axe-man and the Lifebringer. The axe-man held monstrous power and was able to kill a whole planet with a swing, but that was still a lesser feat compared to what the Grand Protector did.

The old man managed to shield a landmass of unfathomable size against the very fabric of reality ripping to shreds. Furthermore, the shield he erected stood strong for who knows how long, protecting the continent from the void outside.

The power of the protagonist wasn't the only superior thing from the vision, making Zac wonder if it was the benefit of having an Epic class. When he'd occupied the axe-man, he was only a spectator, but he'd become the Grand Protector for a bit. He still remembered scenes from the ancient man's earlier life, though there were only small snippets.

He had felt how the old man's very body was tempered with the Dao itself, impregnable and immutable. While Zac was grasping at thin strands of a larger fabric, the old man forced the Dao to follow his will.

Zac could only imagine that such a being was at least A-grade, perhaps even higher. The demons believed there were cultivators higher than A-grade, but they barely had any information about C-grade warriors, let alone lofty beings above that. If those beings existed or not was shrouded in mystery.

The extremely clear vision had also given him an unprecedented harvest, and he was elated as he looked at the Dao screen in front of him.

Hardness (Middle): Endurance +25, Wisdom +5.

Sanctuary (Early): Endurance +5, Wisdom +10.

He had not gained one new seed, but two of them, from the vision. Even more impressively, he had even gained two stages to the first of them, Hardness. This time, he wasn't disappointed that he hadn't attained the same Dao as the old man since he understood that he was millennia away from grasping those concepts.

He guessed that the Grand Protector possessed something that could be called the Dao of Immutability. The vision ended after he had integrated with the golden shield, but Zac had some time to feel its marvelous effects, and it truly contained myriad concepts.

Two notable additions were the Daos of both Time and Space, two extremely high-tiered concepts that were out of reach for warriors at his class as far as he knew. The Dao of Immutability forced space itself to bend to its will, and the protection it provided lasted over the eons.

It was truly a top-tier Dao, and the Dao of Hardness was just one small part of it. His insights were based around two things: the massive aura of the shield itself and the hardness of the old man's will that forced even the tears in space to be unable to reach his body.

The shield held the weight of a planet, which resonated with Zac's earlier insights into heaviness, so gaining a snippet of the Dao of Hardness felt pretty natural. The second piece was a mental component of hardness, and it reminded Zac of the upgrade he'd gotten for the Dao of Heaviness back at the auction.

In fact, Zac believed gaining his second Dao Seed, the Dao of Sanctuary, was closely related to that insight back then. He had gained a mental component of heaviness due to the immense weight of responsibilities pressing down on him at that time.

He had been in the middle of the beast hordes and his sister was still unaccounted for. The Dao insight could be seen as a result of being overwhelmed, but by now, he had found his bearings in life. Over the past weeks, he had seen just how much his town had grown, from a small, dented camper into a flourishing kingdom.

That was why the old man in the vision had resonated with him. The Grand Protector had watched over his continent for countless years, seeing the rise of civilization. With his power, he could have easily become a supreme emperor, but he was content to simply watch from the shadows and protect the place from unseen threats.

Zac very well understood that sense of wanting to protect those around him. It was the very reason he desperately tried to get stronger. Initially, it was just for himself and his sister, but the circle of people he wanted to protect had slowly expanded as he saw his island come to life.

Both of the Dao Seeds he gained were on the defensive side, but Zac knew that they were meant for different things. The Dao of Hardness was mostly for personal defense. He could imbue himself or his shield with it, and from there endure stronger strikes.

But the Dao of Sanctuary was based on protection. He currently wasn't sure if he had any skills that could benefit from it, but he felt its purpose was to help protect others rather than himself. **[Nature's Barrier]** might be a possible candidate, though that skill already benefitted from infusing it with Dao of Trees.

In any case, he knew his survivability had increased by a notch, both from a huge influx of points into Endurance, but also being able to empower himself further with new Dao Seeds. He had used Dao of Trees as a defensive skill until now, but it wasn't a purely defensive Dao like the Dao of Sharpness was purely offensive.

Besides, the Dao of Trees was inconvenient for him to use for various reasons. First of all, it contained the breath of life, which essentially was poison for him in his Draugr form. It also wasn't possible to infuse nonliving things with that Dao, so strengthening his metallic shield was impossible.

However, the happy surprises didn't end there. He actually had gained another title.

[Scion of Dao: Attain five different Dao Seeds while still at F-grade.

Reward: All stats +5]

This title wasn't listed in the booklet he'd gotten from Brazla, meaning it was likely pretty rare, and Zac could understand why. Most people had tremendous trouble attaining Dao Seeds on their own, and no classes gave five Dao Seeds as far as he knew.

It was the same with Zac himself; all five of his seeds could be linked to the three visions he had seen. The Dao of Sharpness might have come later, but it was only due to forming the foundation after seeing the Dao of Axe that he'd managed to attain it.

His latest gains had also pushed not only Wisdom, but even Luck past 100 points. That only left Intelligence that was still below that level, currently sitting at 97. But Zac chose not to put any of his free points into Intelligence, even though he was so close.

He hadn't heard of any benefits of having all attributes over 100, and besides, he would likely gain a couple more titles before reaching level 75. He didn't want to waste his precious free points into an attribute with limited benefits to his classes.

In the end, he put all his six points into Strength, pushing it to 429. He was mostly done, but there was one final thing he wanted to do before checking in on his axe. It was with some anticipation he opened the Dao Ladder, but he could only wryly smile after seeing Abbot Everlasting Peace still sitting on top.

By now, Zac felt pretty much certain that the old man had actually attained the Dao of Karma rather than some lower component. He had asked Alyn about it when he visited the Academy, but she knew nothing about it apart from some rumors.

It was an extremely rare Dao, and those who grasped it were revered as great sages. It was supremely powerful, since it was said that a person with a high command of the Dao of Karma could not only see into the future, but he could even tamper with fate itself. He could bring calamity onto his enemies from the other side of the universe if he wanted.

Zac felt a bit helpless, and he had a feeling that passing that old man on the Dao Ladder would be even harder than clearing out the incursions. But Zac didn't begrudge the old man his opportunities and instead focused on the things at hand.

It was time to check on his axe.

The last of the cursed rats fell, and the abyssal shriek from the escaping specter barely registered as Thea sat down with a groan. She was hurting all

over, but she was determined to last the final ten days. So many were counting on her, and the very fate of her planet still hung in the balance.

Meeting that Dominator had been a true wake-up call. Her grandpa had always told her to never get complacent, there were always bigger fish to fry, and she wished that he weren't correct for once. They couldn't even escape that monster, forcing her to use her final measures.

The side effects of using her ultimate retreat were even worse than she had imagined, and she internally swore for the hundredth time at the Tutorial pixies. She already knew that using that skill meant losing levels, but the pixies never said anything about losing even more levels from consecutive uses.

When she'd used it the first time in the mountains back home, she lost a level, and while it was regrettable, it was better than dying. But this time, she actually lost three levels, making her wonder just how many levels she would lose the next time she was forced to activate it.

Then again, the cost of using **[Heaven's Ward]** might rather be related to the damage that was blocked than the number of uses. She had been forced to block over a dozen of those chains after Zac was knocked unconscious, after all, and that should have required immense energies. Even that man was barely able to block a handful of them.

The thought of him made her once again open up the Hunter Ladder, and she was happy to notice that she had finally broken into the top ten of the ladder. The unceasing beast waves that had been ravaging across the mountains during the past days had been a perfect opportunity for her since her **[Petal Storm]** was extremely suited for large numbers of weaker enemies.

In fact, she had even gained a full two levels in the past days, a feat that would have been impossible back home. After a brief stop at her own rank, she quickly moved down to the 400 rankings to check Zac's status, but her heart tightened when his name was nowhere to be found.

She kept moving further and further down the list, but he was nowhere to be seen, so she opened up the Power Ladder from back home. Thea breathed out in relief when she saw that Zac still held a commanding lead in the front, but she quickly returned to the Hunter Ladder.

Finally, she found out what was going on. He had moved all the way up to the forty-sixth position in a few hours, once again showcasing his power. Her mouth curved upwards as she gazed up at the skies.

Nothing would stop that man.

Screams echoed across the cliffs as she slowly ripped the limbs from the human, one by one. Anytime she saw the sigil of the Medhin Empire, resentment rose in her heart, and she couldn't stop herself from tormenting those people a bit.

She knew that the real family members were off-limits, even though she wasn't thrilled about it. But those rules didn't exist for their subjects. They were just fated to become fuel anyway, and a cruel smile adorned Inevitability's face as she ripped off another arm of the Medhin general.

Finally, the screams abated, and the whole mountain became deathly silent. Everything in the surroundings had already been purged by her **[Chains of Fate]**, leaving just herself on this mountain.

This small distraction, unfortunately, didn't lessen the frustration that had been building in Inevitability's heart over the months. This wasn't how it was supposed to go. The world had finally changed, allowing them to move into the sunlight. But it came too soon, and they weren't ready. The world welcomed the incursions, forcing them on the passive.

Not only that, but some insane human had somehow managed to go and become an in-name disciple of their master. Forget about becoming official disciples themselves; by now, they could consider themselves lucky if their souls weren't ripped out from their bodies when he arrived.

Their ancestors had already failed their tasks, and they had failed as well when the integration finally arrived. Their very existences were hanging by the barest of threads, and her actions the last week had almost closed the last door of salvation.

That beastman was also a decent candidate, but he was below that human who almost managed to kill her in the end. They truly needed this Zachary Atwood to fulfill their goal. But finally, there was some good news. The human was fine and steadily climbing the kill ladder.

Void's plan might work out after all. She was sure he had already finished his tasks back in the real world. Her father never messed around, and he had likely set out the minute the trial started. Inevitability once again looked up at the skies, and they didn't seem as bleary this time.

They might just survive the arrival of the Great Redeemer after all.

GOLD AND BONES

Zac was about to walk out of his hiding spot, but he suddenly realized something. He was almost completely naked. His brows rose in surprise, but as he looked at the ground, he understood what had happened.

Scraps from his former robes lay around him, corroded and discolored. It almost looked like he had molted a layer of skin, and Zac frowned in disgust. He had expected the robes to have repaired themselves while he meditated, but he was dead wrong on that point.

The rat vomit must have overtaxed the robes and destroyed the inscriptions. It was regrettable, since it was a very convenient item, but Zac wasn't overly saddened by it. The clothes had lost their usefulness to a large degree already. The shields it could summon simply weren't strong enough to protect him against threats anymore.

Besides, he had gained a huge amount of Endurance since he got his second class. In fact, he had more than doubled his Endurance in just a few short weeks. It was to the point that he hadn't really acclimatized to the huge improvements, and he still avoided strikes that wouldn't be able to hurt him.

It had become readily apparent during his fight with the rats. He had taken thousands of strikes from the frenzied beasts, but he'd walked away from the battle with only surface wounds that had bled a bit. If he had taken those kinds of strikes during the beast waves, he would have been out of commission in no time.

So the loss of the defensive option wasn't really an issue, but Zac would miss the fact that he never needed to change or clean the clothes. It seemed that he would have to go back to his old style of wearing whatever, and he started scouring the mountains of loot in his Cosmos Sack for anything

serviceable.

Finally, he decked himself in the gaudy robes of Tyrbat Medhin, the royal he'd killed during the first day of the hunt. The robe hadn't displayed any real defensive properties during the fight, but Zac chose it for another reason.

He had decapitated the former owner, drenching the robes in blood, but when he found it in his Cosmos Sack, it was completely spotless. This could only mean that it had the cleaning feature since Zac sure as hell hadn't done a wash during the hunt. Judging by how the man fought, having multiple rings with impressive defensive properties, that also wasn't the only benefit of the robes.

A warm sensation spread through his body the moment he put it on, and he was surprised to see that grime that had set in his hair was turning into steam. In just a minute, he was completely spotless like he had taken a proper bath.

The effect was amazing, and the inscriptions must have been designed by a neat freak. But Zac still didn't like the overly gaudy design, and he felt like Brazla while wearing the clothes. He chose to don a dark brown cloak that covered most of the gold, and since he was dressed, he could finally leave his hiding spot.

Zac was filled with anticipation as he walked over toward where he hid the crimson crystal containing **[Verun's Bite]**. He first scanned the vicinity, but thankfully, nothing had changed while he was busy with his vision. There was only a sea of rat carcasses all around him.

He also realized that the miasmatic field that he'd generated with **[Fields of Despair]** was completely gone from the rat den, and not a smidgeon of Miasma remained in the atmosphere. It looked like the skill's effects were temporary, meaning that he couldn't use it to terraform his surroundings to become death-attuned.

A full six hours had passed since he'd hidden the crystal, but when he moved the carcasses blocking it, not much had changed. The only difference was that the crystal now was almost completely opaque. Zac barely managed to make out the silhouette of something inside, but he couldn't tell if anything had changed about the axe.

Zac was a bit stumped when he gazed at the huge crystal. It still emanated no energy fluctuations, and it might just as well be a large rock if he didn't know what it contained. But he had no idea what to do with it now. The time on his hands was limited, and he had no idea how long it would take for his

weapon to finish its evolution.

He had hoped that it would be done by the time Zac had gained his Dao seeds, but he had no such luck. He also wasn't comfortable putting the crystal into his Cosmos Sack, since he had no idea whether that would somehow interrupt or affect the evolution.

Quite some time passed as Zac stared at the crystal, his frown deepening by the minute. Finally, after staring intently at the crystal for almost half an hour, he gave up and instead took out his shield. He didn't dare to destroy the crystal, so he would have to occupy himself with something else. He had only checked on one of the benefits from finishing his quest, and this was as good a time as any to check out the other.

The shield looked a bit worse for wear, but it wasn't beyond redemption. It would need to be worked by a blacksmith as soon as he got back to Port Atwood. The first thing he did after equipping the shield was to imbue it with the Dao of Hardness.

He would have thought some change would take place after the infusion, like how his fractal blades changed colors by which Dao they were infused with, but the shield looked just the same. There were no extra layers of protection forming above it either, and if Zac hadn't been the one pushing the energies into the shield, he wouldn't know it was there.

But he still knew that the Dao worked, since he could feel how it reinforced the whole shield from within. He tried slamming the shield with his fist to test the effect, and there was a clear improvement. He couldn't even leave a dent in the shield after using over half his force, showing just how powerful the Middle-stage Dao Seed was. Of course, he still knew that he could break the shield if he truly exerted his full force.

But that didn't mean that the Dao of Hardness was sub-par, but rather that the shield wasn't anything special apart from being a high-quality product. It wasn't a Spiritual Treasure like **[Verun's Bite]**, but something along the lines of the robes he'd just lost.

He also tried to infuse the shield with the Dao of Sanctuary, but the Dao wouldn't enter it, just like how his Dao of Trees initially wouldn't enter his axe. He also tried to infuse his body and his clothes, but nothing worked.

For now, it looked like the second Dao Seed would have to be a passive attribute boost since he couldn't figure out a way to use it in battle. Then again, the power of an Early-stage seed was limited, and not something he would bring out in a battle with his current power.

Next, he started up **[Bulwark Mastery]**, and as he expected, there was a guidance system showing him how to work the shield. He had already found out that this type of skill was extremely common, and most classes had a similar one. The difference was that both his mastery skills also provided Dao Visions, whereas the equivalent skills for lower-grade classes just provided the guidance system.

Interestingly enough, this guidance system didn't only show him the illuminated paths on how to move his shield, but it also simulated attackers whom he had to block.

With Zac's ample combat experience, he had no problem quickly learning the basic steps and movements. It also showed some offensive moves, such as bashing the shield forward, ramming, and pinning down opponents. It even showed how to punch forward and use the lower edge of the shield as a weapon.

Since the skill only was at Early mastery, it didn't incorporate any of his Daos, and Zac soon stopped training with the skill. He knew that he would be able to advance **[Bulwark Mastery]** with just a day or so of training since the only thing required to advance the mastery to Middle was to fully learn all the moves.

But now was not the time for that. Almost a whole day had passed between the battle and his meditation, leaving just nine more days to reclaim his placements. His position on the Hunter Ladder had improved quite a bit, but he knew that it would likely get harder and harder to keep gaining positions.

He returned to the side of **[Verun's Bite]**, but nothing had changed since his last check. Finally, he took out some ropes from his sack and started fastening them around the crystal. He decided that he would simply bring the thing on his back as he explored the tunnels.

However, he only managed to walk fifty meters in the direction of the exit before he could hear ominous crackling sounds from the crystal, and he hurriedly put it down. He noticed a large crack running all along the thing, and he wanted to slap himself for his impatience.

The cracks only got worse and spread all over the thing, and Zac could only look on in dismay. But the moment the whole thing shattered, a massive aura exploded out from the crystal, forcing Zac a few steps back. Zac's hopes reignited as he looked at the scene from afar.

A large projection suddenly appeared where the crystal once was,

reaching over five meters in height. It was Verun, but its appearance had changed a bit. The most obvious change was the increase in size, with its wither height increasing from roughly 1.5 meters to its current size.

Its maw was still an oversized vortex of grisly fangs, making its head just enormous by now. But its body was more proportional, and it rippled with sleek muscles. It felt like a true predator and felt far more nimble than the stocky barghest, but far more powerful than the agile gwyllgi.

A shockingly powerful roar emitted from the specter, and suddenly, all the carcasses of the largest rats burst open, and blood streamed toward it from all directions. Meanwhile, the actual axe rose from the ground, but before Zac could get a proper look, it was covered by the incoming blood.

Thankfully, it didn't form yet another crystal, and after just a few seconds, the blood was gone. Verun slowly dissipated, turning into motes of light that entered the axe as it fell down on the ground.

As Zac walked over to the axe, he still felt some power undulations from it, but it had mostly calmed down by now. There were some noticeable changes to the axe, the foremost being the head. It had been made of some dark metal before, but now it looked grayish-white and seemed to be actually created from an enormous tooth.

Its edge was still curved, but it was slightly larger compared to before, almost reaching half a meter by now. Its edge was a bit uneven as well, and his thoughts still went to Orc chieftains when he looked at **[Verun's Bite]**.

Zac hesitantly dragged his finger along the edge, and he immediately felt a sharp pain as blood started to flow freely from his finger. Even after he imbued his hand with the Dao of Hardness, it took a bit of strength to once again cut through his skin, which made it very telling just how sharp the edge was.

There were still a few smaller teeth fastened to the back of the head, but now there was one that was far larger than the others. It almost formed a counterweight and created a sharp spike that pushed out from the back of the axe-head. Its needle point looked extremely sharp, and Zac knew that it should have extreme piercing power if he needed it.

The handle was still wrought of some wood, though it looked a bit more grayish compared to before. But more interestingly, five fractals ran all along the handle. The one closest to the end of the haft was glistening with a crimson red, whereas the others were pitch black.

Zac couldn't be sure, but he felt as though there was a meaning to the

colors. He had fed the axe enormous amounts of blood to help it evolve, and the first fractal shone with that very same color. Perhaps he would need to keep feeding it even more blood to light up the other fractals as well.

However, the changed appearance was not the only thing different about it. It also emitted a brutal and unrestrained aura, and looking at it felt like staring at a prehistoric beast. Zac couldn't be sure, but it felt like this aura would be even stronger in battle, and it might even possess the ability to suppress his enemies.

The final difference became apparent when he gripped the wooden handle. The moment he touched the haft, he immediately sensed another presence in his mind. However, it wasn't at all like the intrusion of the specters he had felt earlier.

It was like he shared a mental connection with another being, and he immediately understood that the connection was to Verun itself. The link even allowed him to communicate in a way, though Verun wasn't sapient like Brazla, at least not yet.

The moment the link was established, Zac felt a rapid stream of emotions. Exultation and pride. Recognition and kinship. Tiredness. Not long after, the link weakened, and no more emotions were transmitted. However, Zac understood that the link wasn't just a temporary thing, but it was temporarily weakened due to Verun being tired out from the evolution.

Finally, he was done with the cave, and Zac effortlessly threw away the carcasses blocking the exit. He took one last look at the cavern that had provided him with so many benefits before entering the tunnel with newfound confidence.

IMMUTABLE BULWARK

Zac couldn't help being in a great mood as he walked through the winding pathways of the tunnel. He had gotten a slew of power-ups, and even his main weapon had received an evolution. Even better, at the end of the road, there was a mountain of treasure waiting for him. Falling into the ravine was starting to turn out all right.

His mood was quickly getting dampened as he walked. First of all, the tunnels felt almost endless, and he started to worry just how long the passages were. Perhaps he wouldn't even reach the inheritance before the time was up. But more importantly, the aura of darkness in the tunnel was slowly increasing, making the air oppressive.

He had no idea what the old Array Spirit had prepared, or whether it even had any control over the situation. But he feared the old spirit was leading him toward the source of the darkness to kill the enemies of his fallen sect. Or perhaps the truth was something completely different.

The words of the old man echoed in his mind, and he had started to form a hypothesis about what had happened here. Anzonil had said that everything had been ruined by one mistake. Not long ago, Ogras had told him that countless people in the Multiverse had turned to monsters in their pursuit of power, and Zac believed that might have been the case with this place.

They had either created or come in contact with the mysterious aura of darkness and sought to control it. It was undeniable that the darkness made people stronger, but they also turned into raving lunatics when they were infected. The specters had a humanoid form when they had attacked him and Thea on the mountain peak. What if they were the former sect members? Perhaps Anzonil wanted him to kill the specters not out of hatred, but out of

mercy.

It was a moot point, since Zac had no method of killing them unless they were susceptible to the Dao of Hardness for some reason. So it was with some trepidation that he stopped when the tunnel once again exited into a large den. This time, there was no ocean of rats, but instead a sea of insects that most resembled ants.

They were more uniform in size compared to the rats, and there were four types. The largest was a huge blob of an ant in the middle of the den, and it was easily over fifteen meters across. Judging by the short, withered legs, Zac suspected it was unable to move and relied on the smaller ones to bring it food.

Surrounding what was clearly the queen were a few elite guards that were around three meters each, each emanating powers close to that of E-grade. Finally, there were the common ants, and they came in two sizes, medium and large. The whole scene reminded him of the Ayn Hive back on his island, though the ants in front of him looked far more similar compared to the extremely diverse shapes of Ayn insectoids. But there was one more difference.

These things were obviously infected by the darkness. Frenzied battles were taking place all among the smaller ants, and the large queen was currently feasting on one of the worker ants. The whole hive emitted a type of insanity and chaos that was very different from the cooperation that usually characterized ant species.

Zac briefly wondered if he would have to cut his way through all manner of creepy crawlies to get to the treasure as he prepared himself for battle. But he didn't really mind since his level was still pretty low, and he would be able to quickly gain some more levels this way.

His thirst for power was at an all-time high since his meeting with Inevitability, and he knew there was no time to waste. This time, he didn't opt to stay hidden and spectate and instead jumped straight into the fray with his axe at the ready.

Clattering from thousands of agitated ants echoed through the caverns, drowning out all other sounds, but Zac simply ignored it as he started killing ants with breakneck speed with his axe. The gloomy transformation of the area from **[Fields of Despair]** had already taken place, and **[Deathwish]** was also activated.

Since he had gained the skills already, he was using his axe from the start.

He wanted to increase his speed as much as possible on his way to Anzonil's treasury. The ants had thick plating to protect themselves, but the upgraded **[Verun's Bite]** cut through them like they were paper, and his speed of killing was unprecedented in his undead form.

However, he was a bit disappointed to notice that **[Deathwish]** wasn't very effective against these beasts. The defense was clearly higher than the offense of the ants, and even though the specters kept appearing around him to reflect the bites, they mostly harmlessly hit the chitinous shells.

Zac soon decided to completely abandon the skill since it was just a waste of Miasma. Instead, he started to work his way around in a circle of the outer area of the cavern. The queen was simply sitting there in the middle, and her bodyguards hadn't moved. Perhaps the queen wasn't even a combat class, but rather a being that solely focused on birthing more ants to protect the hive.

He wanted to kill all these ants first for the experience and ladder placements, and he was worried that if he killed the boss first, the other ants would flee. This cavern was different from the last one; it contained tens of small tunnels leading god knows where, and Zac wouldn't be able to block them all to keep his prey inside.

Suddenly, his danger sense rang in his mind, but no matter where he looked, he couldn't see anything. Then, a second later, an unseen force slammed into his mind, and he couldn't help himself from falling over with a groan. If he were human, he would likely have emptied his stomach by now, but instead, the Miasma in his body was going haywire.

He couldn't see straight, and it was like his body didn't understand the commands he sent. A few piercing stabs of pain cut straight through the confusion. It was two of the larger ants that had taken the opportunity to attack, and each had bit into his torso with their large pincers.

Black ichor was slowly dripping out of the wounds, making Zac groan in pain. But his almost 500 Endurance wasn't just for show, and he got to his feet with a roar. The two large ants tried to distance themselves from him, but they were quickly bisected by two swings empowered by the Dao of Sharpness.

They were extremely quick, and Zac held nothing back in his attacks so that they wouldn't have time to flee. He didn't have access to **[Loamwalker]** in his current form, so he needed to make sure to quickly kill the speedier targets.

Zac took a few steadying breaths to calm the Miasma that was still not

fully under control inside his body and looked over at the queen. The air around her shuddered with power, making Zac frown. It had likely shot out some mental attack that briefly rendered him immobile.

Unfortunately, he didn't have access to **[Mental Fortress]** as an undead either, and he could only try to fortify his mind with the help of the Dao of Hardness. One of the insights he got into it was a mental resilience, and it should provide some protection against psychic attacks. But the queen was an E-grade being, and Zac had a feeling that a Middle-stage Dao Seed wouldn't be enough to completely block its attacks.

He quickly popped a healing pill into his mouth as he kept killing the frenzied ants around him, and he was quickly forming a small hill of corpses. It looked like he couldn't ignore the fat blob as he killed its subjects. He would have to hope that the darkness in the smaller ants would make them crazed enough to keep fighting even after their queen died.

He had lost some of his power due to the four grisly puncture wounds, but it wasn't all bad news. The attack from the queen was the third and final strike he needed to endure to complete his quest for **[Immutable Bulwark]**. Now was as good a time as any to test it out, and he quickly activated the skill as he rushed toward the center of the cave.

A huge fractal shield that was over two meters tall and four meters wide appeared in front of him as he ran. It had the turquoise color of Miasma, and fractals formed some sort of pattern in the center of it. But the thing that truly drew Zac's attention was the huge sinister spikes covering the shield. The skill wasn't purely defensive.

In just a few seconds, he had mowed down over a hundred ants from his charge, and his killing efficiency was even better than when using his axe. The speed of killing beasts was still worse compared to the carnage he could unleash when using **[Chop]**, but it was a clear step up from waiting for his enemies to kill themselves from **[Deathwish]**.

Zac reactivated **[Deathwish]** as a precaution as he was approaching the stronger ants and the queen. Since the bodyguards could pierce his body with their pincers, they should be able to hurt themselves as well, and perhaps the skill also worked against mental attacks. To his surprise, almost ten specters immediately appeared in front of the shield, and he quickly realized what was going on.

There was a synergy between **[Deathwish]** and **[Immutable Bulwark]**. He had been worried before about the contradictory nature of his first

offensive skill. He was a class that focused on blocking, but his skill required him to get hit to hurt his enemies.

He already knew that **[Deathwish]** didn't activate when he used his shield, but that changed the moment he activated his new skill. Any ant that tried to bite their way through the fractal shield was immediately attacked by spectral copies of themselves, proving that an attack on his bulwark was counted as an attack on himself.

The only downside was that both the power and energy consumption seemed worse compared to when he used his own body as the punching bag.

Still, this was an enormous upgrade as Zac saw it, and it would allow him to avoid any damage while simply pushing forward with his new fractal bulwark. The enemies would be gored by the spikes if they didn't dodge quickly enough, and if they tried to cut their way through, they would be just harming themselves.

Soon he arrived at the encirclement of the larger ants that guarded the queen, and he pushed forward like a runaway train. He even imbued his new defense with the Dao of Hardness as he closed in on the last distance.

But just a few moments before he would slam into the final barrier of ants between himself and the queen, another wave of the mental attack hit him. He had already fortified his mind with the Dao of Hardness, but the power in that attack was just massive.

He couldn't stop himself from falling over yet again as Miasma was once again going out of control. But the protection of the Dao Seed helped him at least keep his consciousness through the attack, and he quickly placed the shield right above himself for protection. Just a second later, he sensed a large stream of energy entering him, proving that at least one of the larger ants had just killed himself on his improvised turtle shell.

He wondered if he would be able to stay beneath his shield while all the ants killed themselves upon it, but the queen soon made herself known with another mental blast that shocked Zac's system.

The time between the attacks was far shorter now, making Zac wonder if proximity was a factor in the attack. In any case, it meant he couldn't stay beneath his shield. The three strikes had drained a large amount of his mental energy, and combined with his Dao usage, his head was starting to hurt a bit.

If he kept getting blasted, he might fry his brain, and he had a feeling that his Duplicity Core couldn't help him with that. His danger sense was already ringing in his mind, so Zac quickly got on his feet to make a final charge at

the queen.

But the moment he got up on his feet, he saw an incoming enormous ball of chaotic energies. Zac wanted to move out of the way, but he knew he didn't possess the speed with his current class. He had no choice but to brave it, so he pushed a huge amount of Miasma into **[Immutable Bulwark]** as he imbued it with the Dao of Hardness.

A huge explosion rocked the whole cave, and Zac couldn't stop himself from being pushed back over fifty meters. His arms shook from the force of the impact, but he was mostly fine. However, the same couldn't be said of the queen.

A large burn mark adorned her enormous gut, and the thick shell even had some cracks that leaked blue blood. The attack had completely backfired on her, and Zac wanted to take the opportunity to finish her off.

There was only one thought running through his mind as he once again ran toward the shrieking hive queen: this new skill was right up his alley.

INDOMITABLE

The Miasma was roiling inside his body as Zac surveyed the battleground. Broken carapaces and shells were strewn all over, and it was impossible to take a step without putting his feet in a blue puddle of ant blood.

He made a cursory check for anything of value as he walked toward the only passage that didn't seem to be created by tunneling ants. After he had managed to reflect some of the ultimate attack of the hive queen, the fight was mostly over.

She'd seemed to be afraid to attack him again, and that hesitation allowed him to get close enough to finish the fight with his axe. A few quick chops and she was dead. Luckily, killing the queen had the effect he hoped for, and the rest of the ants had turned completely insane in their anger, desperately trying to kill him.

He had made a few discoveries during this battle that helped him understand the strength and shortcomings of his new skill. The good was that the defensive properties of **[Immutable Bulwark]** were extremely high.

It also seemed to differ from how **[Chop]** worked. That skill was based on the actual weapon he used, so when he changed weapons, so did the strength of the fractal edge change. But his new defensive skill was different. It didn't look anything like his shield, and his actual shield took no damage when **[Immutable Bulwark]** was attacked. He was, however, unable to summon the skill if he didn't have a shield equipped, so they were connected somehow.

Zac guessed that the power was based on his Endurance, like **[Nature's Barrier]**, since it wasn't based on his actual weapon. The Miasma consumption was also based on how much the shield was attacked, just like

an array.

He had also learned some new things about **[Deathwish]**. It did not appear that it worked on mental skills, since the queen had no reaction after attacking him multiple times with the mental waves. This was something Zac had seen as a possibility before.

In fact, there were multiple means of attack where he suspected the skill wouldn't work. Illusions and poison were two other examples. It appeared that there needed to be a kinetic component to the attack, such as a punch or a fireball, for there to be anything to reflect.

The battle had also given him three new levels, two of which came from killing the queen. It was crazy to think he had gained ten levels in just one day, but he also noted that the speed was already slowing down markedly.

He almost wished there would be a few more rooms like this before he got to the treasure. There was no real threat to him, and he could generally treat it as rooms full of experience points. However, his worry grew as the corruption in the atmosphere around him kept increasing.

Even the flora in the tunnel was starting to become twisted and odd, even though the corruption in the tunnels was far lower compared to the caverns for some reason. Perhaps the array screens that hid the tunnels he used also stopped some of the darkness from passing through.

But even then, the effect on the plant life was noticeable. Some of them even produced an odd black substance, and Zac collected some of it in case it could be useful or valuable. However, there was clearly something wrong with the black liquid. He accidentally got a few drops on his hand while he was collecting it, and in just moments, he felt rage bubbling up inside him.

It was only a few minutes later that the urge to go crazy and destroy everything around him subsided, and Zac was shocked by the effect. Just what would happen if some beast ate these plants on a daily basis?

Zac's wish for more beasts to kill was soon fulfilled as he came to yet another cavern, this one occupied by things that looked like fuzzy scorpions. The battle took around two hours, and he almost got himself killed due to carelessness.

There had actually been a boss hiding beneath the ground all the time, and Zac only realized his mistake when his danger sense warned him of the incoming enormous stinger. He had barely managed to swirl around and block the strike in time.

Time started to blur, and hours turned to days as Zac cleansed one cave

after another. Zac started to worry that the old Array Spirit was taking him on a tour in a circle that spanned the whole mountain range. Or perhaps he was walking straight toward the edge that the System had imposed on the hunt.

The darkness was also ever-present around him, and it even started to affect his mood to a slight degree. He found himself constantly harboring murderous impulses that he had to forcibly push down. Only entering a tunnel after a cavern gave his mind some reprieve, as the arrays truly seemed to be darkness filters.

The critters he killed were also turning increasingly insane, and they also started to exhibit various deformities from the corruption. Zac was currently fighting against the patriarch of a cavern that was inhabited by roughly a hundred huge lizards.

Each one of them was close to E-grade, but they looked like they were barely alive since they were covered in grisly scars and pus-filled tumors. Some had grown odd appendages, and others seemed barely coherent enough to take care of themselves.

Zac finally felled the beast, and a surge of Cosmic Energy brought him to level 48. He was only twelve levels away from his main class now, and it proved just how efficient it was to hunt E-grade beasts to level.

Just in the past two days, he had killed more E-grade beings than he had during the first six months of the integration, which had skyrocketed his levels. However, the things he had encountered could barely be counted as E-grade, providing far less Cosmic Energy than the Star Ox, for example.

He felt that the speed of gaining levels was slowing down, just like it had with his main class. But he still was extremely satisfied with the result. His time down in the tunnels had also proven an extremely efficient way to grind his position on the Hunter Ladder, and he had already jumped back up to the sixth position.

His Gatherer Ladder was steadily dropping, though, and he was down at the ninth position now. He had seen multiple names in the top fifty disappear, likely meaning desperate battles were taking place aboveground, which was quickly consolidating the wealth.

There was nothing of value down here, and he could only pin his hope to Anzonil's treasure trove. Zac took a last look around the cavern for anything that might be of value, but as usual, it was just disgusting carcasses.

His brows furrowed when he saw that the leader lizard suddenly started shaking, and the next moment, a ghastly specter shot out of it with a screech.

It made a beeline for Zac, its claws already poised to strike.

Zac readied his axe to meet the incoming ghost, but at the last moment, he had an idea. He quickly moved his axe as he infused himself with the Dao of Hardness. The ghost tried to rake his chest, but it suddenly shrieked in anger and pain when a copy of itself suddenly attacked it.

It tried to swing right back, but the moment after the spectral projection from **[Deathwish]** had attacked, it turned to nothingness. The specter seemed completely enraged and tried venting its anger on Zac.

It quickly unleashed a barrage of attacks on Zac, but between his robes, his Endurance, and his Dao, it only felt like someone was scratching him. The same couldn't be said about the specter. It howled in pain with every strike, and the pain seemed to make it even more desperate as it even tried to bite Zac's head.

Zac had to force himself to stay still, and a small stream of Cosmic Energy the next moment told him his gambit had been a success. He already knew that **[Deathwish]** returned the same type of energy as the original attack, though it was formed by Miasma, so he surmised that if specters could kill themselves, then so could he with the skill.

It turned out he was correct, and it was as though a stone had lifted from his chest. If he could actually kill the ghosts by just standing still, then he didn't really have much to worry about unless there were some stronger ghosts that they hadn't encountered aboveground.

The piercing wail came to mind, for example. Zac had no doubt that being was E-grade, and he did not want to test whether his endurance or that thing's power was greater. It had managed to scramble his brains momentarily from god knows what distance, so he couldn't imagine a battle in melee range going his way.

Still, it was with newfound vigor he pushed toward the next cave, and the persistent aura of darkness didn't feel as oppressive any longer. However, more and more ghosts started to appear in the caves, all of them hiding in the stronger beasts.

Zac surmised that they perhaps were draining the energy of those they possessed, and used the powerful animals as personal feeding grounds. He already knew that they were in need of Cosmic Energy to survive, going by the thousands of ghosts that had assailed him on the mountaintop.

The more frequently appearing ghosts proved they weren't all harmless to him either. One had managed to slink into his mind just like the last time, and

he barely was able to force it out by madly channeling the Dao of Hardness.

It was lucky too, as the ghost had actually tried to use Zac's arm to sever his own legs with **[Verun's Bite]**. It was by a hair that he managed to stop himself from amputating his leg, and sweat was running down his forehead from the close call.

After that, he no longer dared to let the ghosts freely have at him, and instead had his eyes peeled in case they tried to possess him again. The moment he suspected that was what one of the ghosts planned, he immediately slashed it with his axe, briefly scattering it and enraging it.

But that also drastically slowed down his speed of killing the things, and it was quickly getting hard to keep track of all the ghosts as they grew more numerous in the caverns. Worry started to grow as the situation was growing more and more strained.

Finally, it got so bad that he started wondering whether he even dared to keep going. Dozens of ghosts were wailing in a cave that had once housed yet another rat den. They were frenziedly trying to get at him, and Zac had to keep running as he sorted out which ones were attacking and which ones tried to possess him.

He already knew that putting his back against a wall had no effect; the ghosts could easily pass through them. Even his newly attained defensive skill proved useless against the spectral beings, and they simply flew right around it without being impeded.

But suddenly, he gained a surge of energy as yet another ghost killed itself by clawing his chest, and Zac opened up his menu like a drowning man. The surge of power in his body told him that he had finally reached level 50, which meant that he should have gotten a new Class Quest.

What type of skill he attained and how easily he could complete the quest would dictate whether he would keep going or not. At this rate, he might get possessed at any moment, as there already had been a few close calls in the last caverns.

**Indomitable (Class): Attain a high-stage defensive Dao Seed. Reward:
Indomitable (1/1)**

Zac couldn't help but get his hopes up when he saw the name, but he refocused on the ghosts and slowly whittled them down so that he could focus on the new skill uninterrupted. He was still waiting for a second Dao

Vision, since he still had only gotten the one.

Alyn had told him that higher rarity classes got more Dao Visions, but Zac guessed reality might not be that simple when he noted that Indomitable was yet another normal Class Quest. Perhaps he had gained one higher-grade vision that awarded multiple seeds rather than multiple weaker ones.

That would in a sense ensure that the seeds he gained would have a good synergy since they came from the same individual. But whether he was correct or not wasn't important at the moment, and instead, he focused on the skill. Luckily, the quest seemed to count Seed of Trees as a defensive Dao since the quest was already considered finished. He quickly accepted it, and he felt a new fractal taking place in his mind.

Zac was elated since the placement was almost exactly identical to the one of **[Mental Fortress]**, which together with its name gave a pretty clear indication of what type of skill it was.

It seemed his luck had pulled through for him once again.

CORE OF DARKNESS

It was already in the next cave that **[Indomitable]** proved its worth. It was as though the ghosts hit a brick wall when they tried to enter his mind and were then unceremoniously thrown out. That in turn just enraged them even further, and they immediately tried to tear him to shreds in their anger.

Unfortunately **[Deathwish]**, did not work in synergy with **[Indomitable]** as it did with **[Immutable Defense]**. The ghosts were rebuffed when they tried to possess him, but they weren't hurt in the slightest. It was a bit of a shame, but still, the mental defense was what he was after at the moment. And it seemed to be even sturdier than **[Mental Fortress]**, even though that skill was at late mastery.

It allowed him to keep pushing through the caverns, and Zac had a feeling he was nearing the end of the subterranean system on his sixth day in the tunnels. Almost all of the beasts in the dens he visited were possessed by now, and animals were hardly more than lifeless husks that housed the spirits within.

Killing the animals barely provided any energies at all, but it at least forced the ghosts out of the bodies. But the specters were changing a bit as well, and he noticed that some were larger and emitted more chaotic energies.

A few of them also possessed a minor version of the piercing wail, but **[Indomitable]** blocked out most of the effect from those attacks as well. The increasing strength of the ghosts also meant that his time wasn't as relaxed as he had hoped. He still needed to be careful about some of the stronger specters, since they could actually harm him with their physical attacks.

It was somewhere late on the sixth day that there finally was a change in the endlessly repetitive pattern of the cavern. It felt like Zac had walked a

whole continent cross-country in the tunnels, and he missed the sight of the sun even in his undead form.

The cavern in front of him hinted at change, but he didn't heedlessly head into it and instead opted to properly check it out first. It was simply enormous, at least ten times the size of the dens he had rampaged through before this. It was also the first cave that seemed to house not a single beast.

Instead, the floor was covered with huge pillars that seemed to be made from onyx or some black crystal. Zac couldn't tell whether they were naturally formed or if they were somehow crafted. But they looked too even and sculpted to be a natural mineral, having perfectly even sides as they rose up to ten meters into the air.

There were thousands of them, and if they held value like normal Nexus Crystals, then he might have a chance to jump straight to the first placement on the Gatherer Ladder. However, his eyes barely glanced over the forest of crystals before they found themselves glued to the center of the cave.

Another crystal could be seen there as well, but it was completely different from all the others. It actually floated in the air, and it emitted such an enticing surge of power that he almost heedlessly ran over to it by instinct.

It felt like the stone had some sort of hypnotic power since his eyes kept returning to it after moving away. But Zac knew it wasn't actual hypnosis, but rather his body craving the power the stone contained just like when he saw the Fruit of Ascension the first time.

The power it emitted eclipsed any treasure he had ever encountered, even the lotus that Abbot Everlasting Peace used. It felt like it held untold secrets, and that if he could just possess it, he would explode in power. He would be able to sweep away the Dominators and the incursions alike and finally make Earth a safe haven.

But there was a problem. The crystal emitted an extremely dense amount of the insidious aura, and it was to the point that the crystal itself might be the source of the darkness. He had a feeling that if he didn't have access to his new skill that protected his mental state, he would have already fallen to madness just by being in its proximity.

However, he still didn't believe his body was lying to him. That thing was truly a grand treasure, and Zac had a feeling that his suspicions about the Eastern Trigram Sect were true. If they'd found that thing, they would likely do anything in their power to utilize the mysterious power it contained, though it had obviously backfired.

Zac wasn't foolish enough to think that he had what it took to control it if an ancient sect had failed, but he was also reluctant to just leave it behind. It was no doubt a treasure that even eclipsed the D-grade, and even if he couldn't use it, he could sell it or save it until he was powerful enough.

But if this was the source of the darkness, then it was odd that there was no protection here. Not a single ghost or possessed beast could be seen, and the tall pillars were the only things around it. But Zac was still wary, and he stayed still and observed the surroundings for two hours.

It cost him quite a bit of Miasma just to stay close to the cave, and he needed to keep a Miasma Crystal in his hands to counteract the loss. He was forced to continuously imbue **[Indomitable]** with more energy to counteract the lure of the Core of Darkness, which was what he decided to call the treasure in the center of the cave.

At least nothing had moved in the slightest as he observed the cave, and he had already made a few plans as he waited. He had made up his mind; he would snatch that thing. Of course, if things turned south, he would have to let it go, but he refused to leave behind such a treasure without giving it a try.

He had already spotted the exit on the opposite side of the cavern, so he knew where he needed to go. But before he did anything, he put on an amulet. Luckily, he had brought the amulet that hid his presence from the undead that he got from Ogras, and he hoped that it would at least have some effect in case the ghosts rested inside the crystals. He also imbued his mental skill with the Dao of Hardness to improve efficiency.

This time, he didn't jump down the five meters from his vantage in the tunnel, but instead silently climbed down the wall, careful not to make a sound. The moment he exited the protective array of the mouth of the tunnel, he immediately heard a low humming sound.

It wasn't from a person, but rather a sound of all the pillars vibrating. Zac had no idea what that could mean, but he was happy if that was the only sound. It could have been a bunch of ghosts wailing instead, but not a ghost was in sight even after he had climbed down the wall.

He didn't move for a few seconds, afraid he would trigger something, but the droning sound was the only thing that could be heard. So Zac started to silently move toward the Core of Darkness, careful to stay to his pre-plotted path. He was afraid that getting too close to the pillars might trigger something, so he had carefully mapped out the path that would take him to the Core of Darkness while maintaining the highest distance from the crystals

as possible.

It was pretty disconcerting to walk between the towering pillars, and it almost felt like he was inside some cursed forest. The darkness both in the atmosphere and the crystal pillars was palpable, and Zac increased his speed somewhat to get past the area as quickly as he could without creating any waves.

He was loath to stay in this cursed place longer than he had to, so he was almost running as he got closer and closer to the core. But his fears were suddenly realized as a ghost emerged from one of the crystals close to him. Zac immediately disintegrated it with a quick swing of his axe, but its appearance proved that he wasn't alone in the cavern.

Destroying the ghost that way only bought him a few seconds, so he immediately started rushing toward the core, no longer caring about avoiding making any sounds. Two seconds later, an enraged wail echoed through the chamber, and that wail brought with it pandemonium.

Innumerable ghosts rose from the pillars, and soon the whole ceiling was blotted out by the specters. There were thousands of them, many emitting even stronger auras than any specter Zac had encountered so far. The worst-case scenario was true. The pillars housed the ghosts like the possessed beasts.

Zac was full of alarm as he rushed toward the Core of Darkness as fast as his legs could take him, and he even pushed Miasma into his legs to increase his speed. Luckily he had managed to pass most of the pillars already, and only a few hundred meters remained.

But a storm of ghosts was rapidly descending on him, and Zac immediately equipped his shield and summoned **[Immutable Bulwark]** and his two passive skills. He held the shield right above his head as he imbued it with the Seed of Hardness.

The ghosts could pass straight through the fractal shield normally, but they were unable to do the same when the shield was empowered by a Dao. They could still pass around it and attack him from the other sides, but it at least lessened the attacks on him a bit.

A few of the larger ghosts were almost immediately upon him, and his Miasma was rapidly getting expanded to protect himself from tries to possess him. But not long after, Zac started to gain streams of Miasma from the ghosts who finally had killed themselves in their frenzied attempts to stop his advance.

The Miasma he gained from **[Fields of Despair]** was far below what was expended to continuously defend, and Zac knew that he wouldn't be able to slowly grind these ghosts to death with **[Deathwish]**.

The large ghosts were far too strong. Not only did they manage to rend gashes on his skin that started to bleed the black ichor, but their attempts to possess him also forced him to expend a large amount of Miasma. Had it only been the basic ones, it would have been a different story, but this seemed to be the place where the strongest ghosts gathered.

He kept putting one leg in front of the other as he ran, and suddenly, he was completely unencumbered by any attacking ghosts. Zac looked up with some confusion and found himself staring straight at the Core of Darkness. Desire to touch it almost blocked out everything else in his mind, and his hand even reached toward the shining crystal. Zac forcibly moved his hand away and quickly averted his gaze with trepidation. That had been too close.

He quickly shot a gaze behind him to find that the ghosts were loath to approach any closer. Suddenly, one of the smaller ghosts wailed in rage and flew forward to bite Zac. However, it didn't even get halfway to him before it suddenly disintegrated, and its particles were sucked into the crystal.

Zac was surprised, since he wasn't expecting it to feed on the ghosts. He even started to consider carrying it in his arms as he fled to the exit of the cave. It would keep even the largest ghosts at bay, providing safe passage. But he shook his mind after a bit. He didn't dare to actually touch that thing since he had no idea what would happen.

This thing might be the source of the downfall of a sect, and running around with it in his hands was tantamount to suicide. He quickly took out a chest wrought of some unknown metal instead. It was pretty large and could contain at least two cubic meters. Inscriptions covered most of the thing, and it weighed almost half a ton from his approximation.

It was something he had looted from one of the summit palaces. A bunch of valuables that emitted strong energies had been stored inside it, but before he opened it, he hadn't sensed the slightest fluctuations. So Zac hoped it would be able to contain at least some of the aura of the Core of Darkness, giving him enough time to stow it away into his Cosmos Sack. Since that place was a separate space, he didn't think it would be able to cause any problems as long as he stored it.

He ignored the increasingly enraged screeches and wails of the ghosts as he lifted the chest, carefully maneuvering it to enclose the core. The moment

it was fully encapsulated, Zac quickly snapped the thick lid shut, but before he could put the chest into his Cosmos Sack, a wave of some unknown force cascaded out from the Core of Darkness and passed right through the chest.

Zac only sensed [**Indomitable**] activate, and immediately fail, before his vision turned black.

HEART OF OBLIVION

A slow but steady heartbeat echoed out into the void, each thump vibrating with the primordial Dao. For untold ages, the **[Heart of Oblivion]** grew, its tendrils reaching further and further. But suddenly, its sanctuary was encroached upon.

His eyes were the stars and his hand was the sky, and when he moved, the Dao shied away. He gripped the heart and clenched with enough force to tear the fabric of reality to shreds. The shockwaves shattered the black hole that the heart hid inside, the explosion destroying innumerable planets.

Unwillingness. Desperation. Hatred. The heart shattered, its remnants fleeing to all corners of the myriad planes. One day, it would return.

A tower reached toward the stars, thrumming with dark powers. It was completely black and charred, as though it had been struck by an endless number of lightning bolts, and millions upon millions of bodies hung from varying weapons that had been slammed into its rough exterior. Darkness slowly swirled around it, a testament to the owner within.

Thousands of warriors desperately fought against a tide of frenzied and putrefied beasts, the wide plains they stood on already covered with the fallen. In the background, a towering roc stood perched on a hill, its eyes radiating boundless darkness.

The ghost slumbered deep within the earth, only occasionally waking up in a bout of frenzied mania to wreak havoc upon its former home. A wail containing its self-hatred and desperation couldn't help escaping its incorporeal maw before the darkness once again shrouded its mind.

The young beggar could only look up at the floating palaces in the sky and dream of a better life. But fate had abandoned him, straddling him with a

weak body unable to cultivate. He was trash, forever relegated to the lowest rungs of society. A whispering beacon called to him, and he crawled deeper and deeper into the sewers until he found the pitch-black gemstone that would change his fate.

The scenes kept changing in a dizzying array, and Zac had almost lost all sense of reasoning by now. But one thing in the scenes was constant: the darkness. Each vision only lasted for a few seconds, but what he had seen was enough to scar him for a lifetime.

Luckily, many of the visions were not as bad as the ones filled with unrelenting carnage. Most of the visions were of hidden pockets of the Multiverse, where the splinters of darkness drifted about unchecked and unencumbered. The visions kept sweeping him away, but suddenly, they stopped as he found himself in front of a woman sitting in a lotus position in a vast cave.

Her skin was as white as death, and she wore robes that were completely black apart from the occasional silver details. While her features were unblemished and perfect, it was impossible to feel a sense of beauty, and Zac rather only got a feeling of desolation and death from her.

An ocean of Miasma slowly swirled around her, its density thick enough to turn the energy into a liquid. Suddenly, the woman opened her eyes, and Zac found himself staring into two pitch-black orbs of the abyss, somehow even darker than his own.

“Child, you have stepped on the path of Oblivion?” She sighed as she looked down at her hands. “Is it fate?”

The flurry of visions had stopped, but Zac still had no idea what was going on. Had he been teleported, or was this all an illusion? He desperately tried to utilize any method he had learned during his entrapment in the corridor, but there were no clues on how to get out.

The feeling was the same as when he had his Dao Visions, and the fact that the woman in front of him spoke to him just like the guards indicated this all might be real. His real body was likely still back in the cavern, and god knows what was going on.

Zac was desperate since he knew just how bad the situation was. His real body might currently be exposed to the corruption of the Core of Darkness, and at such proximity, his Miasma would soon be drained from the consumption to keep himself safe.

He had a strong feeling his core wouldn't be able to help him out in this

type of situation. Either the specters or the mysterious crystal itself would take possession of his body long before the process could finish.

“How curious, I do not recognize your lineage,” she muttered, showing a slight change in her expression for the first time. “Karma ties us; we will meet again. But it is time for you to return.”

A crystalline hand pointed toward him, and suddenly, a storm of Miasma was ripped out from the ocean around them and crammed into his mind. It felt like his soul would rip to pieces until it was suddenly stabilized by some unknown force.

The next moment, enough Miasma to explode him a thousand times over was crammed into **[Indomitable]**, and it felt like his mind had truly become unassailable. The vision shattered around him, and the last thing he saw was those two familiar pitch-black eyes.

The next moment, he found himself standing in the cavern, and to his shock, he was holding the Core of Darkness, or rather, the splinter from the **[Heart of Oblivion]**, in his bare hands against his forehead. He quickly tried to throw the thing into his Cosmos Sack, but it was too late as it suddenly disappeared with a shockwave. Unfortunately, that wasn't the end of it, as he suddenly found an alien presence in his head.

The black crystal had rushed right through the defenses of **[Indomitable]** and entered his mind, and he simply had no means of removing it. Zac was dismayed by these developments, but he had even more immediate concerns. The moment the splinter entered his mind, its restrictive effect on the specters was gone.

A cacophony of wails echoed through the chambers as the specters assaulted him with enough wrath to make it seem like Zac had killed all their ancestors. He found himself in the middle of a storm of rabid ghosts who completely ignored their wounds as they tried to rip him into shreds. Zac quickly oriented himself and immediately rushed toward the exit at the other end of the cavern.

Wounds were quickly accumulating on his body, and the golden robe of the Medhin royal was completely drenched black before he had even run a third of the way. At least he was gaining a huge amount of energy from the continuous kills since the ghosts were even angry enough to attack his Dao-empowered fractal shield.

Suddenly, it was as though his whole body thumped from a heartbeat, though not his own, and he couldn't stop himself from falling over from the

shock to his system. He quickly looked inward at the splinter, only to see that it had changed, and hundreds of tendrils were growing out, reaching toward his pathways from his mind.

Panic filled Zac's heart, since between the ghosts that inhabited this mountain and the hundreds of visions he had been shown, he knew only too well the fate that awaited those who were corrupted by the **[Heart of Oblivion]**.

He desperately erected as many defenses as he possibly could with **[Indomitable]**, but the black tendrils effortlessly crushed them, and Zac groaned, since every defeat felt like his soul was ripped in two. But suddenly, a shocking change appeared in his mind.

Archaic fractals wrought out of pure Miasma appeared, forming a defense that was infinitely stronger than the one he'd erected himself. He was completely befuddled for a second, but his mind quickly turned to the mysterious woman in the vision.

Judging from her appearance, she should be a Draugr just like him, which might be why she helped him. She also seemed to understand what was going on far better than himself, and it felt like he only kept finding more and more questions as he trudged along.

It seemed he needed to look into the heritage of his current form as soon as possible, and how he could even become a Draugr at all. His Cosmos Sack back home was filled by notes from Mhal, and Zac felt that it would be a good place to start looking.

But now there was no time for that. The mysterious miasmic fractals had stopped the advance of the black tendrils, at least for the time being. The runes had even created something like a separate dimension that contained the splinter away from his mind and his pathways. But they hadn't stopped the unceasing onslaught of the ghosts. Zac forced himself up to his feet and heedlessly pushed toward the tunnels.

He'd already used **[Verun's Bite]** to destroy the specters in front, but the wounds were just accumulating too quickly. His vision started to get blurry as he stumbled and almost ran straight into one of the pillars.

A new presence suddenly entered his mind, and his bleary eyes turned toward his axe with reignited hope. It was his Tool Spirit that had finally awakened from its slumber. Apart from the initial communication after the evolution, it had been in hibernation the whole time.

The only time it showed any reaction had been when he killed E-grade

beasts, at which point, some of their blood got absorbed into the crimson fractal on the handle. When he'd first upgraded the axe, it had been a shimmering crimson, but the color had soon dimmed to a weak and watered-down red shade.

However, with every kill, the intensity of the color had increased, like killing E-grade beasts was charging up the fractal. By the time he reached this cavern, it was already shimmering crimson red once again. Zac didn't know how to communicate back, so he simply spoke aloud, hoping that the beast could hear him.

"I need help, buddy," Zac said with a raspy voice.

Warmth filled his heart as a roar responded in his mind, and the next moment, the huge beast materialized. Another roar echoed through the cavern, and Zac suddenly got a huge surge of energy as Verun ripped dozens of ghosts to shreds with a swipe of its claws.

Pained and even scared wails echoed through the cave as the Tool Spirit almost became unhinged in his goal to destroy everything around Zac. Pillars shattered and were broken from its rampage, and Zac quickly snatched those that he could as he resumed his flight toward the tunnel.

Even though Verun had lessened his burden by a large degree, he still was extremely wounded, and the Tool Spirit couldn't block all of the thousands of ghosts. Many still managed to pass it and attacked Zac with suicidal fervor.

Zac popped his strongest healing pills as he fled, and he barely managed to reach the edge of the cavern, when suddenly, a terrifying sense of danger blared to life in his mind. Zac hunkered down behind his bulwark as he pushed as much energy as he could into **[Indomitable]**.

The next moment, an extremely piercing wail echoed through the cave, drowning out all the calls of the smaller specters. Even with his newly acquired defenses, it felt like Zac was hit in the head with the sledgehammer, and he couldn't stop himself from blacking out.

Luckily, the wail had also stopped the ghosts in their tracks, and they all ignored him to instead turn toward a huge figure that had appeared sometime in the cavern. A roar echoed straight back, and Verun ferociously pounced on the new threat.

The indistinct figure only pointed at the Tool Spirit, and then a deluge of darkness flooded out toward it, drowning the spectral form of the primordial beast. Zac's eyes opened in alarm, but he soon breathed out in relief as he

saw a stream of light break out and enter his axe once again.

The Tool Spirit had been forced to flee, and Zac truly felt it was the best course of action as he started running the last few meters toward the cavern. But his surroundings were suddenly blanketed in darkness, and the next moment, the form blocked the exit in front of him.

Despair filled Zac's heart since he already knew this thing was the leader of the ghosts, the very source of the wails that had shocked his mind the first time the darkness descended. He also sensed that this being was far beyond his power, being Peak E-grade at the minimum.

He knew that there was no way to beat this thing, but he refused to give up without a fight. So he readied himself for his final battle with a grim demeanor, but the specter suddenly started to shrink and transform. In just a second, the faceless shape of the huge specter had changed, and in front of him stood a man in a black cultivator's robe.

He was mostly humanoid, apart from the same type of third eye as Anzonil. He had a handsome face, and he gave off a heroic disposition. But his eyes betrayed desolation, and Zac felt like he looked at someone who had lost all hope.

Zac knew that the man in front of him wasn't alive, at least not in the same sense as himself. Even if the thing in front of him had taken a humanoid form, it was still mostly translucent. It was mostly wrought from the energy from the **[Heart of Oblivion]**, but it seemed to be clashing with some force within that shone with a silver luster.

"You... fool..." the spectral cultivator stiltedly said with a sigh after throwing a glance at the empty center of the cavern. "Tell... master... sorry..."

CURSED SUCCESS

Zac could only gape, and he mutely nodded his head in agreement. He hadn't expected the ghost to speak with him, but it was a far preferable alternative to battle.

"Go..." the ghost responded before it turned away from Zac and disappeared.

Zac thanked his lucky stars that the ghost seemed to have regained his sanity, if only temporarily, and he started to run toward the tunnel. A jumbled chorus of screeches behind him forced some extra strength in his legs as he leaped the last few meters.

He sensed a decrease of darkness in the atmosphere, proving that he once again had passed an array protecting the mouth of a tunnel. He quickly turned around to survey the cavern, and he exhaled in relief when he saw that the ghosts whirled around in confusion. They clearly couldn't see where Zac had gone and frantically flew around in the cave in search of their target.

However, the larger ones seemed slightly more intelligent as they rammed their bodies at the cave opening, making Zac take a few steps back. But the ghosts simply bounced off the unseen shield and roared in rage when they couldn't get through it.

A few of them even tried to rip the air to shreds, and even though Zac was extremely tired and wounded, he felt he couldn't stay here. He wasn't sure if they were just unwilling to give up or whether they could sense the splinter lodged in his mind, but creating some distance from this place was probably for the best. He had no idea just how strong those arrays at the opening were, and it was a bad idea to risk it.

He kept walking for a few minutes, and as the rush from the battle waned,

it was replaced with extreme tiredness. His mind felt like it would explode at any moment. Between those tendrils breaking his mental defenses and the extreme consumption of mental energy, his mind was exhausted to the point that his soul might be wounded.

His body wasn't in much better shape, and he was completely covered in wounds all over. It was a good reminder that he still wasn't invulnerable just from his high attributes. A sturdy frame wasn't enough to completely block out the damage from the stronger ghosts who were approaching, or even reaching, the E-grade in power.

Suddenly, the dark caves gave way to light, and Zac stumbled out of the tunnels with some effort. He had walked the last bit on pure willpower, but now it was as though the air went out of him. His overtaxed mind barely registered the change in the surroundings as his vision started closing in on him.

There was only a smidgeon of Miasma left in his body to barely keep it running, but Zac simply sat down with a grunt and closed his eyes without taking out a Miasma Crystal. It was time to let the last of the Miasma leave his body and return to his human form.

It was only hours later that he opened his eyes again and finally took a proper look around at his surroundings. It was a hallway that looked very much the same as the one he had arrived at from the ravine earlier. The walls were cut with the same precision, and the hallway was illuminated with the familiar crystals.

It gave such a sense of déjà vu that Zac had to open up his status screen to make sure that he hadn't been stuck in an illusion during the past days.

Name: Zachary Atwood

Level: 62

Class: [F-Rare] Hatchetman

Race: [E] Human

Alignment: [Earth] Port Atwood – Lord

Titles: Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter,

Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao

Dao: Seed of Heaviness – High, Seed of Trees – High, Seed of Sharpness – Middle, Seed of Hardness – Middle, Seed of Sanctuary – Early

Core: [F] Duplicity

Strength: 451 [Increase: 55%. Efficiency: 116%]

Dexterity: 232 [Increase: 40%. Efficiency: 116%]

Endurance: 621 [Increase: 60,5%. Efficiency: 116%]

Vitality: 301 [Increase: 50,5%. Efficiency: 116%]

Intelligence: 97 [Increase: 40%. Efficiency: 116%]

Wisdom: 113 [Increase: 40%. Efficiency: 116%]

Luck: 101 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 116%]

Free Points: 3

Nexus Coins: [F] 96,525,943

But the attributes and Dao Seeds remained, proving he wasn't caught in some array. It had even increased since he now benefitted from the boost from **[Forester's Constitution]** once again.

Even before he'd entered the last cavern, he had a free point to allocate, but now there were three. That meant that the insane onslaught of the specters at least had provided him with two levels, making his grind end at level 53 this time around. His Endurance was starting to look completely monstrous, though he knew that the increase wouldn't be as drastic going forward.

The final twenty-two levels of the class wouldn't be so easy since he knew just how many kills were behind the nine levels to 62. And the thirteen levels after that would only be worse. Zac hesitated for a bit, but he finally bit the bullet and put two points into Intelligence. Unfortunately, it wasn't enough for the System to round up to 100, so he put the third and last point inside as well, bringing the total to 101.

There was a direct effect from the addition, and he sensed his power was increased throughout his body, even though his attributes remained the same. He quickly looked at the title screen to see that there was a new addition in the mix.

[Omnidextrous: Attain over a hundred points in all attributes during F-grade. Reward: Effect of Attributes +5%]

It pushed his Efficiency up to 121%, and Zac felt the high-tiered titles were really starting to provide a huge hidden bonus. It provided around 120 points worth of extra Endurance, and almost 100 points more in Strength, which could likely take anyone by surprise at this stage. That many points were more than many had in total, and he had that just as a hidden bonus.

He was a bit annoyed at himself for holding off on putting the points up there, but he hadn't required the extra attributes down in the caverns. The title also wasn't listed in his little booklet of titles, but he realized that might be because extremely few should be able to bring their Luck all the way to 100, at least this early in cultivation.

Zac also realized just how lucrative his week down in the caverns had been when he noticed he had gained roughly 50 million Nexus Coins. It might not have been as high a gain per hour as the best stretches in his Hatcherman class, but he had also spent most of the time walking the endless tunnels rather than fighting.

Finally, he was hopefully done with everything here apart from picking up the treasure. After that, he would be able to join the final few days of the hunt, and he couldn't imagine the situation up there to be anything but desperate. The new Daos and attributes would likely come in handy.

Five E-grade powerhouses were running around up on the surface, two from his and three from the other world. There were the two Dominators, the Medhin emperor, the Medhin crown prince, and finally, the champion of Berum, Beruv Ylvas.

One of the three Medhin royals in the E-grade had disappeared from the ladders three days ago, but Zac had no way to know whether he was killed or simply returned to manage the Medhin Empire. Zac assumed he had been killed since the royal was in the top ten of both ladders. Leaving just a few days before he would get both levels and a title would be crazy.

Zac was still leery about meeting any one of the remaining powerhouses after his battle with Inevitability. His progress down here had given him a huge boost in survivability, but unfortunately, it didn't provide the same boost in attacking power. But that was a later problem, and for now, he needed to deal with his banged-up body.

Even though Zac had changed form, his wounds were still there, and Zac

quickly swallowed a healing pill to speed up the recovery before he took out some of the high-grade meat he had brought. He ripped into it like a starving ghost, and he hadn't realized just how much he had missed the taste of food during the past days.

As he ate, he turned his sight inward, and his eyes were immediately drawn to the mysterious black crystal still hovering silently inside his mind. Surrounding it was a string of fractals wrought from Miasma, and a twang of panic gripped his heart upon seeing them.

He hadn't thought about what would happen if he turned back to human, and had instinctually assumed the crystal would stay locked down behind the fractals. But those were made from Miasma, and there was no guarantee they would stay in his human form. He had come very close to letting loose those dreadful tendrils by his carelessness.

But luckily, no such thing happened. The miasmatic fractals had turned the area with the crystal into a separate space, and it had no bearing on him as far as he could tell. Still, it felt like having a ticking time bomb inside his mind, and as he sat in the corridor, he felt extreme regret over his actions.

Both the ghost and the powerful Draugr woman had seemed to think that he had done something spectacularly stupid by taking this sinister thing. And Zac was inclined to agree after being shown all those visions of other beings who had fused with a splinter. There were no happy endings in those visions.

He had been too impulsive, and his greed had made him get stuck with something that might turn out to be far more troubling than the miasmatic wound that had plagued him until his core was formed. He needed to quickly find a way to get rid of this thing since he had no idea how long those defensive runes would last.

As Zac looked back on his actions, he couldn't believe it was he who acted so foolhardy. That thing screamed danger, and he knew that it might have been the cause of D-grade powerhouses falling. To try to take it was beyond foolish, and he would normally take the long way around such an inauspicious object.

His only conclusion was that he had been manipulated somehow. He briefly considered Anzonil, but he did not think he was the source of the manipulation, though the old man should know the crystal was there. He was more inclined that it was the Splinter of Oblivion that had corrupted his thoughts in order to get out of that desolate cave.

But there was one good thing that had come from this ordeal. He was

suddenly in the first position of the Gatherer Ladder, having passed even the Medhin emperor. Since he hadn't found anything else of value during the past days, it could only mean that the parasitic crystal was counted by the System, and it was regarded as extremely valuable.

A thought struck Zac, and he got up to his feet with a grunt. Suddenly, the whole hallway was filled with mounds of treasures. Zac had poured out everything that seemed to be of high value in his sack but still kept his first position. He had a feeling that even if he lost his whole pouch, he would still keep his position.

The East Trigram Sect contained lots of great treasures for newly integrated worlds, but Zac estimated that it was a strong E-grade sect, or a weak D-grade sect at the best. Anzonil and perhaps a few others were the only D-grade powerhouses.

Meanwhile, the crystal that had lodged itself in his brain seemed to be a supreme, albeit cursed, treasure that would be considered valuable even on higher-graded worlds. He became extra thankful that he possessed the bangle from Greatest. Otherwise, he might find himself in even bigger trouble from the crystal than from his Specialty Core.

Zac was still far from healed, but he didn't want to wait any longer, so he quickly retrieved all the treasure he had thrown out. He looked like he had been dipped in ink from all the ichor, but at least the golden robes were slowly healing themselves.

Zac started to walk down the hallway, and it was with some relief he saw another gate not far off that looked very similar to the last one. This time, he didn't equip his shield, but simply pushed open the doors with a grunt.

"Welcome young... uh, human? Were you not a Draugr?" the familiar voice echoed through the majestic chambers.

"I'm leaving for the surface soon; looking like a human is more convenient," Zac said with a shrug as he walked inside the room, not wanting to get into specifics.

Its architecture was similar to the last one, with the pillars and beautiful sculptures, but it was far smaller than the last one. The Array Spirit had already materialized in the other end of the room, roughly twenty meters away.

"How curious. If I weren't a ghost, I'd try to get to the bottom of such a mystery," the old man said as he stroked his long beard.

"Anyway, I am here," Zac said.

“It is good to see that you passed my final trial. To see such an enticing treasure but have both the intelligence to spot the dangers and the mental fortitude to walk away,” the old man said with an approving nod. “If we only made the same choices back in the day, so much would be different.”

Zac blankly looked at the old man for a second before he understood what was going on. The Array Spirit had purposely led him to that cavern with the intent to test his character. If he was smart enough, he’d leave that cursed thing alone and walk straight through the cavern to get here.

“Well, yes, it felt like something cursed. I am not strong enough to tangle with such a thing,” Zac said with a straight face, but he could feel his ears heating up from embarrassment.

“If I may ask, those ghosts... Are they your former sect members?” Zac probed, eager to change the subject.

The old man sighed and looked at the exit with deep helplessness and sadness in his eyes.

“Yes, it is true. Will you listen to this old man’s tale?” the Array Spirit said.

Zac was more interested in the treasures, but he also needed to know more about that crystal.

“Please, go ahead,” Zac said.

“The East Trigram Sect was a small sect that could barely be considered a D-grade force on a low-tier D-grade world. We only had half-step D-grade cultivators, but somewhat made up for our lack of power with our insight into arrays,” the old man began.

“I am sorry, half-step?” Zac asked, confused.

CREATION AND OBLIVION

“The trial to reach D-grade is to successfully form a Cultivator’s Core, also called a Cosmic Core. This is not something that happens naturally. There are various methods to do this, but they all have high requirements, and just a minuscule fraction of all E-grade warriors manage to take that final step,” Anzonil said with longing.

“If you almost succeed in forming the core but fail at the last step, you have two options. You can let the core shatter and try again at a later date, but doing this will leave you seriously wounded. Even worse, every following core-forming attempt will be even harder.

“The second option is to force your failed core to stay together, which stops the core from completely breaking apart. It will maintain a small part of its original function, and you will see a slight boost to your longevity. But if you do that, you are still not considered D-grade by the System, and you will cut off your path of advancement forever,” Anzonil explained.

“I had already failed my evolution two times, and I knew the third try would be my last. Alas, I failed that time as well and took the second option to at least be able to protect my sect a bit longer.” The old man sighed.

“In any case, there were far stronger forces all around us, and we constantly were under the threat to be swallowed whole. Luckily, we suddenly saw an opportunity to rise. The son of the Sect Master was the greatest talent our sect had ever seen. He grasped not only our insights into the study of formations, but he was also an extremely adept warrior with deep insight into the Dao.

“I took him as my terminal disciple, pooling all my efforts into turning him into a powerful pillar of the sect. We had no doubt that he would become

a true D-grade warrior in the future and help our small sect rise given enough time. But war came to the continent, and our forces were destroyed or swallowed up one by one.”

“That’s when that man arrived at our sect,” Anzonil continued, for the first time showing smoldering anger in his eyes. “That accursed man. He appeared to be a rogue cultivator and a complete lunatic. He destroyed half our sect and caused so many deaths with his sinister spells.”

Zac nodded and remembered the sword scars that covered some of the structures up on the surface.

“Through our arrays and great sacrifices, we finally managed to kill him. But that wasn’t the end of it. Out of his body, two crystals emerged, emitting boundless power. As you understand, one of them was the one that I managed to move to the underground cavern, where it has rested since,” the old man continued.

Zac had a pretty good idea what had happened to the other one, and Anzonil soon confirmed his guess.

“The other one was taken by Raval, my disciple.”

Zac’s thoughts turned to the spectral cultivator who blocked his path right at the end, who asked him to apologize to his master.

“After seeing the crystal with your own eyes, you must think my disciple to be a brash fool. But those were desperate times. The fate of our sect was already hanging in the balance even before the arrival of that man, and we had just lost a large number of our forces and hidden cards to kill him.

“The moment the surrounding sects learned what happened to us, they would immediately launch a full assault. It wasn’t greed or personal gain that drove Raval, it was his wish to protect the sect he loved. As expected, the surrounding sects soon arrived with their armies, but Raval exploded with never seen before prowess. He single-handedly pushed all our enemies away, killing dozens of elders and other powerhouses.

“We were all elated, and I even thought of having someone else absorb the other crystal, even though it emitted such ominous energies. After that battle, all the surrounding sects stayed away, but Raval started to change over the following years. He became aggressive, moody, and unstable,” Anzonil said with a shake of his head.

“Finally, I had to confront him, and that’s when I learned what was truly going on. That’s when he showed me the large square far beneath the surface and the massive tunnel system he had created. In fact, those tunnels you

walked were not made by me, but rather by Raval himself.

“He felt himself getting corrupted by the crystal, and he had no means to remove it. It had completely fused to his very being, and it didn’t even let him kill himself. So he hatched a plan. He created an enormous circle that runs beneath the whole sect and turned that into an array whose purpose was to purify the crystal.

“He circulated the dark energies through this massive array in hopes of slowly grinding out the sinister and corruptive elements of the crystal. After I learned what was going on, I spent years working with him to improve the array, and initially, we thought we were on the right track. Unfortunately, the power of that cursed object was just too massive,” Anzonil said. “I think you can imagine the rest.”

“I was actually stopped by Raval in the last cavern,” Zac said, making the old man’s brows lift in surprise. “He asked me to relay that he was sorry.”

“Sorry?” the man repeated with sadness in his eyes. “It is I who should be sorry. If I were stronger, he wouldn’t have been forced to infuse himself with that cursed object to protect our sect.”

The two stood in uncomfortable silence for a bit until Zac finally couldn’t stop himself from trying to gather some more information about the thing in his mind.

“Did you ever learn what that crystal is?” Zac asked.

“Raval called it a piece of the **[Heart of Oblivion]**, and after expending a large portion of my wealth, I learned a few things.” Anzonil nodded.

A sour feeling entered Zac’s mouth after hearing that the old ghost had actually already spent most of his money, but at this moment, the knowledge might be even more important now anyway.

“My research pointed me toward an extremely old scripture that described the source of Dao and the universe itself. Those things are highly debated topics, so I do not hold much faith that the old sage who wrote it got it exactly correct. Unfortunately, the ultimate truths of the Dao are not something our Sect had access to even at our peak.

“But when it spoke of the creation of the Multiverse, it touched upon a subject of interest for my research. It said that in the beginning, there was only Chaos, but from Chaos, both Creation and Oblivion were born, the two highest Daos apart from Chaos itself.

“These two Daos created the Multiverse, and all the lower Daos were birthed from them. I doubt the story holds water, but I managed to confirm

that the Dao of Oblivion does exist, and that it is extremely powerful,” Anzonil said with a face conflicted between hate and longing.

“The rumors we found were that **[Heart of Oblivion]** was born from a splinter of that pure original Dao, which makes it impossibly valuable. However, it was somehow corrupted, which created the sinister energies that permeated it.

“Such power is not something that normal people can touch upon, much less control, which makes it a poison that drives men mad. That’s why great warriors sought to destroy the heart all those endless eons ago. That thing is truly stubborn and somehow survived even in its fragmented state, though it is now only a shadow of its former self. But just that shadow is enough to destroy all that it touches.” Anzonil sighed.

Zac thoughtfully looked inward at the trapped splinter in his mind, and a tumultuous whirlwind of emotions passed through his mind before he steadied himself. At first, he was elated that he had snatched a treasure that contained a trace of a Supreme Dao, and he couldn’t even imagine how valuable something like that was.

But that also showed just how big the trouble was that he was in. Raval seemed to have been in late E-grade when he absorbed the splinter, but he went mad within a decade, even though he did everything in his power to stop it. He even built an array that was as large as a country to stem the corruption, but even that only slowed down the process slightly.

If the Miasma fractals in his mind broke, how long would he have until he became yet another wailing ghost himself? He would have to put his mind into figuring this out as quickly as possible, but after asking a bit more, there was not much else the Array Spirit knew. It was only a shadow of its former self, after all, and both its memories and knowledge were limited.

It also begged the question of just who that woman in the ocean of Miasma was. Just how powerful must she be if she was able to seal such a monstrous item? And she also mentioned that she didn’t recognize his lineage, and he had no idea if that was a good or a bad thing. And just why did she help him? If there was something he knew, it was that one couldn’t count on the benevolence of others. That was how you ended up robbed and dead.

“By the way, you called my race royal earlier. Could you explain that further?” Zac asked, trying to glean some more intelligence from the old Array Spirit.

“You don’t know?” Anzonil said with surprise.

“I have no connection with the Undead Empire, so my knowledge of my heritage is extremely lacking,” Zac explained.

Honestly, he hadn’t even given the subject any thought before. Whether it said Draugr or Undead in his status screen didn’t really make any difference for him, but after the vision and Anzonil’s comment, he felt that he needed to know more.

“Well, I only retain a fraction of my memories in this form, so I do not remember all the details. But simply put, you are a purebred undead, uniquely suited for miasmic cultivation,” the old man explained.

“Almost all undead are turned species. For example, humans who have died and been infused with Miasma. They are not pure undead since their original bodies were not meant for that sort of cultivation. Even their progeny who are born undead are afflicted with the same problem,” Anzonil continued.

“Sorry, progeny? The undead can have children?” Zac asked with some surprise.

“Of course, but not until they reach late E-grade and have evolved their bodies to D-grade.” Anzonil nodded as a matter of course, giving Zac another surprise.

During the past two weeks, he’d had ample time to scour through his body, and he’d retained almost none of his bodily functions. His heart didn’t beat, and the black ichor in his veins was simply sitting there.

He did breathe, but he wasn’t sure if he was just going through the motions or if his body actually picked up oxygen somehow. He didn’t eat or drink either, but he did consume a small continuous amount of Miasma to simply function, which was different from how it was being in his human form.

“In any case, this mismatch with Miasma slows down cultivation and makes it far harder to break through the bottlenecks. In return, the undead have generally higher attributes, and they live longer before they turn insane. So if an undead manages to break through its shackles, it will likely be stronger than a human on average,” Anzonil explained.

“Then what about Draugr?” Zac probed.

“The Draugr is one of the five purebred undead races,” Anzonil said. “Even though they look mostly human, they are not. They have no living counterparts, the same as the other four pure races. Their origin is unknown,

just like the true origin of the undead in general.”

“And this makes cultivation easier for us?” Zac asked.

“As far as I’ve understood it. The five races have a natural connection with Miasma that other undead do not have, and their bloodlines are almost considered holy. If you walked into the capital of some planet in the Undead Empire, many of the young lasses wouldn’t hesitate to procreate with you,” the old man added with a perverted grin.

Zac coughed in surprise since that change in demeanor from the old man was quite a shift from the image of kindly sage that he had mostly shown so far. Anzonil seemed to understand what Zac was thinking, and quickly continued with a cough.

“But I wouldn’t recommend it. From what I’ve heard, the elders of the five races aren’t big fans of their genes being wantonly spread throughout the empire. They rely on their superior lineages so that they can maintain their power. They have built up great advantages and Heritages over millions of years with the help of their natural endowments and don’t want it spread into the public,” he added.

Zac was generally happy to learn that he had actually dodged the problem of handling Miasma, something he didn’t even know existed. But it only made him more confused. These five races seemed like pretty lofty existences; they wouldn’t likely deign to invade some newly integrated planet.

And why did he become a Draugr because he was stabbed by the Corpselord? Zac was absolutely certain that undead general wasn’t a Draugr. Mhal looked completely different from both himself and the woman in the vision, and he rather felt like something that was the result of Necromancy.

It was probably related to his Specialty Core. It didn’t feel like something that had appeared as a result of Mhal infusing his body with that corruption, but rather something that was stirred awake by the foreign energy. Was he born with the core, perhaps something left by his mother?

It felt like his confusion only increased the more answers he got.

REWARDS

Even though the situation was pretty confusing to Zac, he was at least right in front of someone who could help him get a better picture of what was going on.

“Do all of us Draugr look the same? Or can we have red shining eyes as well?” Zac asked just to make sure that Mhal wasn’t a Draugr as well.

“I am not sure, but from what I understand, your eyes are unique and not something other undead possess. Red shining eyes? The Eternal Clan, another of the five races, might sometimes have red eyes. It is part of their blood arts,” Anzonil answered after mulling it over.

“Vampires,” Zac mouthed with surprise, and he quickly asked a few follow-up questions about the Eternal Clan.

From the old man’s explanation, it really sounded like they were vampires. Were the old stories from Earth all true? Would he encounter dragons and werewolves as well in the future? But Zac also knew that the red eyes might just be a coincidence. The Corpselord neither felt like a vampire nor used any blood arts, so he was likely of some other origin.

Zac kept asking about the Undead Empire and the Draugr, but it was clear that the Array Spirit wasn’t as knowledgeable about the subject as with the darkness. He didn’t even know what the other three races of purebred undead were, though he did remember one of them was of the ghost type.

He also had no idea what different lineages could mean when Zac asked about that in a slightly roundabout way. Anzonil said that there were many old clans among the Draugr who were considered nobility. But most of the Draugr were simply normal cultivators, though still elites of the Undead Empire.

That the woman in the vision didn't recognize his lineage might simply mean that his form wasn't related to any of the major clans. But perhaps there was more to it that Anzonil simply didn't remember or know. The old man was an Array Master after all, not an expert on undead genealogy.

Zac's intuition told him that it wasn't something so simple as him not being of noble birth. The Draugr woman had seemed surprised to not recognize him, which might mean that the secret was larger than that. In the end, it came back to the notebook of Mhal. He still couldn't read the undead script, but he would make learning it a priority when he came back.

For now, he had no clues of how to deal with the thing in his head, but the Path of Oblivion the Draugr woman mentioned was the first clue, and perhaps he could find more if he looked into the Draugr. Another potential source of information would be Thea's library.

It was a gift from the System just like his shipyard and repository, which meant that there was a possibility that it contained knowledge that was out of reach from even a Half-Step D-grade cultivator. He already knew that Brazla's creator was at least a top-tier D-grade Hegemon with many powerful allies.

He also knew that the Creators were a supreme race of golems that was almost as old as the System itself. Unfortunately, it was impossible to learn things from them since they only were interested in building and selling their ships. But it proved that it wouldn't be a stretch if Thea's library had been ripped from some ancient civilization that had access to all kinds of knowledge.

The only issue was how to get access to the library since knowledge was extremely valuable, and Henry Marshall was a wily old man. But his rapport with Thea was pretty good, and he thought he had an idea of how to trade for access without really losing anything. So he would need to find her before the trial ended so they could make a deal.

Besides, it would be nice to see her again to make sure she was okay.

"So... uh... you mentioned some treasures earlier?" Zac finally asked when he felt he had learned all he could from the Array Spirit.

"Yes, of course. I apologize, I do not know how long I've been sitting here, so I took the opportunity to make some conversation after all these years," the old man said with a smile.

"I do not know how it works, but I could try bringing you back to my town if you want?" Zac probed.

Zac mainly asked because he felt bad about the fate of the old man and wanted to let him leave these lonely caverns. But having a sapient Array Spirit to control all his arrays would also be a huge boost for Port Atwood.

“Thank you, young man, but this old man’s work is not done. The fact that Raval managed to regain his form and communicate for a bit is proof of that.” Anzonil smiled.

Zac didn’t understand what the old man was getting at until his eyes suddenly widened in understanding.

“You’re still running the cleansing array,” Zac said with surprise.

“Tens of thousands of years now.” The Array Spirit nodded with a smile.

After thinking it over, Zac finally had a decent picture of what was going on. He had initially seen the darkness as some sort of trial by the System, but he now realized that wasn’t the case. It was Anzonil who released the accumulated darkness from the cleansing array into the atmosphere, like opening the valves of a dam. The System simply used that fact and made it part of the trial.

He wasn’t completely sure why the ghosts only appeared at that time, but perhaps opening the seals also meant that the ghosts were able to sneak out from the caverns for a bit to feed on the dense Cosmic Energy at the summits. They then had to return before the openings down to the caverns closed.

Zac was moved by the old man’s resolve. To rip out a piece of his soul and infuse it into the array just for the small hope of healing his disciple was a true show of love and dedication. He wondered how many would go so far for someone who wasn’t even family.

But suddenly, he had a troubling thought.

“But why is the other crystal inside the purification array? Wouldn’t that make things difficult for you?” Zac asked.

He was afraid that he had somehow ruined the array by taking the splinter of the **[Heart of Oblivion]**, so he asked to make sure.

“It’s truly an impediment to my efforts. Raval and I placed it inside the array to check on the effects of our changes to the cleansing array. But things went south too quickly, and I had no time to move it out when it all fell apart.” Anzonil sighed.

“I can’t get close to it in this current form, and I think that Raval avoids it. I believe the effect of gathering multiple crystals increase your power even further, but the corruption also grows worse. The fact that Raval hasn’t touched it in all these years is proof that part of his rationality remains,”

Anzonil said with a smile.

Zac started to get a sour feeling after hearing the old man's explanation. What would happen if he left without telling the old man what had truly transpired in that cave? Anzonil would probably find out soon enough that something had changed in his array, and would perhaps assume that his disciple had consumed the second splinter.

"I guess I should come clean," Zac said with a sigh and spilled the beans, only skipping over the part with the Draugr woman.

"I was wondering if you would tell me," Anzonil said with a sad smile, and the next moment, a pillar with a Cosmos Sack rose from the ground next to them. "This old man might just be an Array Spirit now, but I can still sense the changes of energies inside my array. Your taking that cursed object wouldn't escape my senses."

Zac could only wryly smile in embarrassment. It seemed that the old man had been testing him once again.

"But you seem in far better shape than my disciple ever did, so I didn't stress the subject. Respecting other cultivators' secrets is important," Anzonil added.

"I have a few special means. I didn't absorb it like your disciple. The thing is currently locked away in a separate space," Zac only said, and it was the truth as far as he could tell. "I have no confidence in meddling with such an object with my current power."

"So you came prepared; that is good to hear. But if you would listen to this old man's advice, then I urge you to discard any thought of actually using that thing. That object might be able to bring you endless power, but also endless suffering. A moment of carelessness will lead to ruin," Anzonil said with a serious face.

"Thank you. I will not do anything with that thing unless I have full confidence in succeeding. If I ever find a method to control it and help you two in the future, I will do my best to find this place again," Zac promised.

Anzonil nodded with a kindly smile before he indicated for Zac to take the Cosmos Sack. Zac looked over at it and knew that it was the promised inheritance. He inwardly felt it was a bit anticlimactic when he walked over to pick up the small sack.

"You expected piles of crystals and treasures?" The old man laughed when he saw Zac's blank face.

Zac scratched his cheek in embarrassment. The old man had hit the

bullseye, and Zac had kept throwing glances around the room to find any place that could lead to a treasure trove. He had pictured the inheritance to look somewhat like a dragon's hoard.

But he had to admit that made no sense when there were Cosmos Sacks around, though the imagery wasn't quite as strong this way. He went over to take it after an encouraging nod from the old man, and the moment his finger touched the sack, it disintegrated into motes of light that entered his Cosmos Sack.

"What a marvelous sack. I've never seen anything like it," the old man muttered with interest. "The creator must have had extremely deep insight into the Dao of Space to merge separate spatial spaces like that."

"We got it from the System at the start of the hunt. Unfortunately, I do not think we will get to keep it," Zac explained with a smile as he checked the contents of his sack.

He didn't have high hopes since the old man had already said that he'd spent most of his wealth trying to find means to help his disciple, but he still was positively surprised by the things that were added. There was a large stack of E-grade Nexus Crystals and even a few that shone with even denser energy. There was also an assortment of crystals of various elements, likely meant as energy sources for arrays.

Apart from that, there were a handful of intricate boxes, and Zac knew they were meant to house Spiritual Herbs or Fruits. Between the compounding effects of staying inside a Cosmos Sack and the protective arrays of these boxes, the contents inside would stay fresh almost indefinitely. So even if they had stayed here for thousands of years, most of the efficacy of the things inside should remain.

Finally, there were ten information crystals that looked like the one that he'd found the first day. They were conveniently placed in a stand, and Zac quickly saw that eight of them contained information about arrays.

One of them was a copy of the one he owned, but the other seven broached other subjects in the study of arrays. Zac knew just how much information that first crystal contained, and with seven more of them, he essentially had a full Heritage to nurture powerful Array Masters.

The final two crystals were on another subject, inscriptions. This was knowledge that was extremely valuable to Port Atwood since inscriptions were a part of almost all craftsman classes. Not just Array Masters could benefit from these two crystals, but everything from blacksmiths to

alchemists would as well.

“I would suggest not trying to use the D-grade crystals while still in F-grade. It might burn your pathways clean,” the old man said. “Then again, I guess you’d rather use Miasma Crystals anyway?”

“It is still a great treasure, and I can always trade it,” Zac said, not explaining his situation.

He felt the old man was trustworthy, but he wouldn’t divulge his situation to anyone apart from his closest circle. You never knew how it might return to bite you in the ass. The fact that Thea knew about it couldn’t be helped since he had turned in front of her due to his wounds.

“That’s true. The ten information crystals contain the crystallized knowledge in the art of formations that our Eastern Trigram Sect accumulated over the millennia. I hope that you find a way to learn or give those out to someone worthy so that our knowledge lives on,” Anzonil said.

“I will make sure that this knowledge is not lost,” Zac promised.

He wasn’t completely sure whether he would have time to learn about arrays himself since there were so many things on his plate already. But he was interested in finding a side profession when things were less hectic, and arrays was a good option that could help him broaden his skill set.

His current fighting styles were pretty simple and straightforward in both his classes, but adding some arrays into the mix might both catch people unaware and make him more flexible. Some knowledge in arrays was also extremely beneficial while adventuring, since he could turn any place into a fortress with the help of some defensive and slaughter arrays.

“Best of luck, young Draugr,” Anzonil said as he pointed at Zac. “I hope we will see each other again.”

The next moment, Zac was pushed backward like last time, and the next moment, he found himself standing on a secluded cliff overlooking the mountains of the Eastern Trigram Sect.

He was finally back on the surface.

FAMILY DRAMA

Three men were kneeling on the ground of the large, luxurious tent. They were shaking in fright, but not one of them dared to either move or speak up to break the suffocating silence.

“So none of you have found that man after three long days?” the middle-aged man on the throne said with a voice devoid of emotion as he stared down at his subjects.

He had a short beard that was perfectly trimmed, and his black hair was held back in a knot by a jade diadem that was covered in dense fractals. In fact, a casual glance would be enough to spot over ten treasures that would cause a storm of bloodshed if they were placed on the streets of Medhin. But of course no one would even dare dream of taking them from this man.

He was decked in a golden robe with large red fractals. Everything about him screamed of opulence, but no one would ever think the man was anything but a warrior, partly because of the large spear that was never further from him than arm’s reach, but mostly due to the suffocating power that naturally radiated from him.

Emperor Nenothep was nothing like some of the extended family, wastrels who lived a life of luxury while barely contributing to the Grand Undertaking. The core of the family was a ruthless competition of resources and advantages, or at least it had been until the Grand Undertaking was finally coming to fruition.

Nenothep had killed eight of his siblings and cousins in his quest for the throne and imprisoned another fourteen. He was ruthless to others but more so toward himself. He pushed his forces hard, but he had been balancing on the edge of life and death since he was a child, all in order to push himself

further on the path of cultivation.

Now that the world was finally flooded with both Cosmic Energy and fortuitous encounters, he had exploded in power and had ransacked the whole empire for any benefit that could be seized.

“Three days. Hundreds of men,” Nenotheop continued with his even voice as he looked down on his three generals. “Yet the killer of my son eludes you. Do I need to make changes to my ranks?”

The three started shaking even worse since there was no such thing as a demotion, only decapitation and substitution.

“Witness accounts clearly indicated that Repubat managed to grievously injure Beruv Ylvas before he fell, and we saw the direction he fled. Yet he is allowed to recuperate in peace, making us look like fools,” Nenotheop continued, his massive aura causing the throne beneath him to creak from the pressure.

“Lord Emperor, please give us a bit more time,” the man in the middle pleaded without daring to raise his head. “We have found some clues and are pursuing them to the fullest. However, our resources were partly diverted to find this Zachary Atwood.”

Nenotheop grunted in displeasure, but he had to admit that he was the one who gave that order just half a day ago. That otherworlder had been his greatest adversary for the treasures of this dead world, and he had once again been overtaken.

He had been shocked to find that this Zachary Atwood, or Super Brother-Man as the ladder called him, was a lone wolf without a support system. He himself had scoured summit after summit, but he also had thousands of soldiers to pick the mountains clean for him.

Yet this man had been stiff competition, relying only on himself and perhaps a handful of helpers. The only answer he could find was that Zachary Atwood possessed a supreme skill set for sniffing out grand treasures, likely combined with a very high Luck attribute.

Less than four days remained of the hunt, and he couldn't solely rely on himself and his soldiers to accumulate more treasures. Even if he passed Zachary Atwood again, he could lose his position at a moment's notice. He needed to kill that man as well, even more than finding Repubat's killer.

“Perhaps I can help in that regard,” a golden-robed man said as he entered the tent, dragging a shackled woman with him.

Emperor Nenotheop looked over at the person who entered his tent with

mixed emotions. It was his fifth son, Vasidas Medhin. On one hand, he felt pride that he had birthed such a genius, and the man was such a clear successor that he didn't have to worry about the future of his lineage. If the integration hadn't happened, he would be a great source of joy.

But now there was also worry, and to a certain extent jealousy, in his heart as he gazed at his successor. When the Great Redeemer arrived to their planet, the Medhin family would be rewarded for their millennia of efforts and then relocated to their new home.

But there was also a chance to be taken as a disciple by the Great Lord himself, and that had been the goal of Nenotheop since the moment he'd learned his planet was finally being integrated. But his son was simply too stellar and was quickly inching in on him, even though he had five decades of a head start on the road of cultivation.

That in itself was a problem. Nenotheop was already closing in on eighty years old even though he barely looked to be forty, whereas his son was only twenty-eight. While Nenotheop would still be considered a child of the younger generation in the Multiverse, it was undeniable it was better to take in as young disciples as possible.

Would the Great Redeemer even look his way when there was another with at least the same proficiency but far younger? Some killing intent was hidden in his heart, but he still hadn't decided on his course of action.

It wasn't due to familial ties, but rather due to caution. Vasidas was no fool, but rather the opposite. He was definitely ready for a strike, and he was likely even planning an attack of his own. So they smiled and lived in harmony as they danced their dance of death.

This was why Nenotheop was a bit suspicious about the motives of the young man, and his eyes turned toward the young woman who glared back at him with her piercing blue eyes.

"I still haven't found the man who killed second brother, but I might have found a way to get to Zachary Atwood," Vasidas said. "This is Thea Marshall, an off-worlder who was seen traveling with Zachary Atwood for the first two weeks. Perhaps she would be useful in luring him out."

Nenotheop's heartbeat couldn't help speeding up when he understood the opportunity that was in front of him. Zachary Atwood had been simply impossible to locate during the past weeks, but he obviously kept getting treasure after treasure while also killing thousands of cultivators and beasts.

But he hesitated as he looked at the captive. Gaining the first position on

the Gatherer Ladder would be a great win for Nenotheop, but he held no delusions his son would help out of the goodness of his heart.

Just what was Vasidas planning this time?

Zac stretched a bit as he got up to his feet. Since both his body and mind were still hurt from the cavern earlier, he opted to rest for a few hours once he had returned to the surface. As he waited for his body to heal, his mind couldn't help but go toward the Splinter of Oblivion in his mind.

It was still stuck in the separate space along with the miasmic fractals, though that didn't do much for lowering his stress. Even after asking Anzonil, there were many unanswered questions, but he was forced to put them aside for now. The space seemed completely steady, and it was even to the point that he was barely able to see what was going on inside.

But he had other pressing concerns. He needed to figure out what to do for the last days. He was already top dog on the Gatherer Ladder, and the top title was as good as his as long as he didn't get himself killed. But he still was far off his original goal for the Hunter Ladder.

He had only gained one more position during the past days, putting him in the fifth position. He had passed one of the E-grade powerhouses from his final clash with the ghosts, but he was unsure how long he would be able to maintain that lead.

The two names in the lead were Inevitability and Harbinger, which wasn't too surprising. The third was Nenotheop Medhin, and the fourth spot was Vasidas Medhin. The Medhin royal who had disappeared and helped Zac gain a spot was Repubat Medhin.

Zac honestly had no confidence in being able to pass the two Dominators after having fought one of them, and outright killing them was out of the question. However, his eyes drifted toward the two Medhin royals.

Almost a month had passed since he saw the other world's ladder, but at that time, Nenotheop Medhin had been level 89, whereas Vasidas had been at level 78. He couldn't be completely sure, but he had some confidence in killing Vasidas, or at least surviving if he failed.

But at the same time, he wasn't sure if it was worth it. It didn't matter if he improved his position to fourth spot on the Hunter Ladder since the fourth

to tenth positions gave the same rewards, three levels and 50 million Nexus Coins.

He needed to either defeat or pass not only the crown prince but also the emperor himself to get the third reward spot and instead gain five levels. But he wasn't as confident against Emperor Nenotheop. He couldn't be considered recently evolved, and that wasn't the only danger with those royals.

The real problem came with the War Arrays they seemed to possess. He could only imagine that the force that the emperor himself surrounded himself with would far surpass that of Tyrbat, whom he'd killed with Thea earlier.

There was also the issue of his token. Unfortunately, there was no function where it automatically returned after a while, so he still had no option to retreat if needed. So if he decided to assault the Medhin royals, his avenues of retreat would be limited.

So assaulting the royals was a high-risk gambit with limited rewards. Certainly, they both possessed huge amounts of wealth. The emperor had even more treasure than himself if he discounted the **[Heart of Oblivion]**. But what he had gained thus far already far surpassed what he had dreamed of, and he didn't want to get greedy.

He also didn't know if Inevitability was still after his head, so any large-scale activities might get the attention of the people he least wanted to meet.

In any case, he needed more information. He was pretty sure something had changed up here during his time in the tunnels, judging by the number of points others had gathered. Perhaps there would be some way for him to move up the ladder without having to duke it out with the Medhin emperor.

The mountain he was dropped off on was one of the decorative mountains with engravings and a large pillar at the summit. However, now he had a feeling that these things were actually disguised components of the massive array running beneath the mountains.

Since there was nothing of interest on the mountain, Zac started to make his way down the mountain. He kept his eyes peeled for any signs of cultivators or fighting as he descended, but the area seemed pretty quiet at the moment.

He had quickly noted that the stage had shrunk even further during his time below, and he was a bit too close to the edge for comfort. He hastened his steps as he rounded the mountain so that he'd descend in the direction of what seemed to be the core of the remaining hunting grounds.

But at least it didn't seem that the System would force everyone into a desperate melee at the end of the hunt. The area was still plenty large, and Zac didn't think he would be able to reach the other side, even if he tried. Reaching the core shouldn't be a problem, though, if he skipped ascending the summits.

As he descended toward the valleys between the mountains, he quickly realized his assumption from before was correct. The System must have unleashed hordes of beasts into the trial since the foot of the mountain was practically teeming with animals.

There had already been a lot of them at the start of the hunt, but now it was bedlam as packs of animals were fighting no matter where he turned his eyes. The forests were filled with a deafening cacophony of calls, to the point that Zac could barely hear himself think.

A new way for him to not only gain a bunch of points but also work on his levels quickly made itself apparent. Why should he risk his life to fight some E-grade monsters when millions of beasts were waiting to be turned into Nexus Coins and experience?

The hunting grounds had truly become a paradise to grind levels and points.

HUNTER'S PARADISE

Zac wasn't annoyed by the ruckus in the forest. If the whole hunting ground was like this, it would drown out the sounds of battle, which would allow Zac to act more freely without the risk of drawing attention from the Dominators.

Zac took out his axe, and for the first time in a while, summoned the oversized edge of **[Chop]**. As he suspected, the edge had changed slightly to accommodate the new form of his axe. After testing the sharpness with his finger and on a few rocks, he was happy to see that the edge was far sharper compared to before.

His skill had no problem adapting to the increased quality of the axe, making him wonder if there was any limit to how strong **[Chop]** could become. The skill wasn't upgradeable unlike most of his other ones, and he had worried about what he would do about it. But perhaps there was no need to worry. He only needed to upgrade his axe and the skill would follow suit.

He did, however, notice that the energy consumption had drastically increased to accommodate the increased power of the fractal edge. Luckily, his energy reserves had gained a huge boost lately, allowing him to use the skill even in prolonged battles.

Zac was eager to both gain points and to properly test the might of his new axe, and he wasted no time unleashing a storm of violence at the wildlife in the valleys. He flashed back and forth between the packs with **[Loamwalker]**, and his fractal edges were half-moons of death as they effortlessly bisected animals by the dozen with every swing.

There was no contest, his speed of killing was far superior in his human form, and both points and Nexus Coins kept streaming in. Unfortunately, the monsters weren't very strong here, and he was hit with the same reduction in

rewarded energy as he got when killing barghest nowadays.

But he wouldn't stop just because of that, and as he kept killing his way toward the next mountain, he also started performing various tests with his new Daos. He found that the improved **[Chop]** was almost as lethal as when he'd imbued the edge with the Dao of Sharpness before his axe upgraded, and when he imbued the upgraded edge, it emitted a terrifying aura, like it would almost cut space itself.

He also found that he could imbue his edge with the Dao of Hardness without a problem, though the effect seemed quite limited. Perhaps it would be good when hitting things that would harm his axe otherwise. The Dao of Sanctuary couldn't be infused, though, but Zac wasn't surprised by that.

He also summoned **[Nature's Barrier]**, and he was happy to see that he finally found a use for his new Dao. The skill had a pretty surprising change when it was infused with the Dao of Sanctuary. Zac had always been able to change the size of the area the swirling leaves protected to a certain degree, but after he infused it, he could extend the area by almost ten times compared to before.

Even better, as the size increased, the number of leaves increased as well, so the actual strength of the barrier didn't decrease with the increased area protected. However, such a large sphere of protection consumed a huge amount of Cosmic Energy, so Zac quickly removed his Dao before he was drained.

He would only be able to keep that shield going for a minute tops before completely running out of energy. But that was more than enough if he needed to protect a large group from some incoming threat until it could be neutralized.

The Dao of Hardness worked as well, and it turned the leaves slightly wooden from their earlier glistening emerald. The defensive properties were clearly improved, but he felt it wasn't quite up to the level of the Dao of Trees. The skill itself had also been given a huge upgrade with the help of his massive Endurance, and he felt that he wouldn't be completely helpless against Inevitability's chains any longer.

All in all, he had received a good all-round upgrade in the cavern, where even his offensive power had taken a good leap thanks to upgrading **[Verun's Bite]**, so Zac had some newfound confidence as he kept moving through the sea of beasts toward the next mountain.

He wasn't as interested in looting the summits any longer and was more

interested in finding stronger beasts to fight. But even more importantly, he wanted to find one of the five thousand remaining hunters so that he could get an update on what was going on.

The first mountain seemed completely deserted, and he found that the buildings close to the foot had all been looted. Since time was limited, he opted to keep going toward the next one, but when he did, he suddenly noticed a startling change.

It seemed that the System had somehow arranged things so that the beasts were getting stronger and provided more points when he proceeded toward the core of the hunt. Zac looked toward the core area with a frown, unsure of what to do. The density of the beasts around him was just crazy, but where he was, they were pretty weak and provided very little Nexus Coins and Cosmic Energy.

He already had accepted that he wouldn't be able to get to level 75 through the hunt rewards, but he would at least be able to gain at least another level if he moved further toward the core and fought the stronger beasts instead.

He was also more likely to find stronger cultivators further in, which might help him accomplish a task that he had almost forgotten. He needed more alliances back on Earth. Partly for Calrin to expand their business, but also to move across the world to close the incursions.

He didn't know how long the inheritances would take, but according to Ogras, they usually took just a few hours tops. That meant that he would be out closing incursions in less than a week. There would be a need for infrastructure to be quickly put in place so that he wasted no time traveling between the incursions.

In the end, Zac chose to move further toward the core of the remaining area, creating huge swathes of death wherever he went. But the gaps were quickly filled with more beasts swarming to feast on the corpses.

He passed three mountains by as he headed further toward the core, doing a quick inspection for signs of any hunters. But it seemed the outer rim was pretty abandoned, and all the signs of activity were pretty old. But as he approached the fourth mountain, he found a clue.

He noticed the grass on a large field to be glistening with blood thanks to the position of the sun, and even the ground was wet. However, there was not a single corpse to be found, meaning the battleground had been cleaned to hide the activity. This strongly indicated some cultivators had been grinding

points and levels here recently and then tried to hide it.

Zac quickly scoured the area for any clues, but there was not much to go by. Finally, he chose to stalk the foot of the mountain, hoping to find the person's hideout. He caught a lucky break after twenty minutes as he noticed a man stealthily moving toward a building in the distance. Zac didn't approach, though, instead opting to check it out from the distance.

The interiors were completely shrouded in darkness, but Zac already knew his target was inside unless there were hidden exits. However, he was hesitating whether he should enter or just shout from outside. If he entered, he would need to break through the array protecting the building, which might give the person inside time to flee or crush his token.

But shouting from the outside would warn the occupant, and with Zac's ladder positions, he would be a fool not to flee. In the end, Zac opted for the brute force tactic, and with a flash, he slammed right into the array at the entrance with his movement skill.

He was surprised to find himself completely immobilized the moment he passed through the entrance. It was a restriction array, and he hadn't expected such a strong one to be placed down here so close to the foot of the mountain. Zac belatedly realized this was likely the reason this hunter had chosen this place as a hideout.

A sudden sense of danger in his mind was all the warning Zac got before a sword swung with the intent to pierce his throat with immense speed. However, while Zac was unable to move, he could still rouse his Dao Seeds, and between 642 Endurance and the Dao of Hardness, the stab barely drew blood.

The next moment, Zac broke the array by force and gripped the shocked man by his neck with one hand as he snatched the token with his other. It had been hanging by the man's neck, easily accessible in case he needed to retreat quickly.

"I have some questions," Zac said to the horrified man.

Ten minutes later, Zac descended from the mountain once again with a crude map in his hands. It was something John, the man from earlier, had drawn. It detailed the surrounding area of five mountains in each direction, mainly with markers where other cultivators resided and good hiding spots.

With the drastic increase in monsters, a shift had taken place on the surface while Zac was stuck down below. There were very few battles now between cultivators, at least in the outer rim. The people here had simply

staked out a small area for themselves and used the remaining time to farm the beasts below as hard as they could.

These people had no chance of gaining any rewards from the ladders, but the great density of evenly powered monsters had turned the zone into a leveling paradise. They had already gathered a decent chunk of wealth and felt no need to risk their lives to explore any further.

These people on the outer rim were mainly between levels 35 to 40, and killing beasts here was extremely beneficial as long as they didn't get overrun. And Zac was surprised to note that the levels on Earth's Power Ladder had made a great leap.

1. Super Brother-Man | 62
2. Salvation | 58
3. Enigma | 55
4. Thwonkin' Billy | 54
5. Thea Marshall | 54
6. Joker | 54
7. Silverfox | 53
8. Daoist Chosui | 53
9. Guru Anaad Phakiwar | 52
10. Thomas Fischer | 52

...

100. Edmund | 46

His lead wasn't as immense anymore, with everyone in the top twenty having passed level 50. Even though Salvation had been kicked out of the hunt pretty early, he hadn't been idle, and he was now level 58, just five levels behind himself. Thea hadn't had as impressive a performance for some reason, and she had been overtaken by not one but two people.

Zac was a bit surprised since he knew just how efficient in hunting beasts she was. With the conditions as they were, Zac would have thought that Thea would not only keep up with Salvation but possibly even pass him on the ladder.

His friend the Abbot had been relegated down to the thirty-seventh position, but he was surprised to see a new familiar face in the top ten. It looked like Thomas Fisher must have somehow made a huge improvement to reach so far so quickly, since he hadn't even been on the ladder before the hunt.

To reach the top 100, you needed to be at least level 46 now. He hadn't

thought about it before, but he was relieved to see that he wasn't listed twice. That would have raised some questions he did not want to answer.

However, according to John, things were likely not as calm closer to the core of the hunt. He had occasionally heard sounds of battle carrying all the way over here, most notably a massive battle taking place three days ago. John figured it was the fight that had ended with Repubat Medhin disappearing from the ladder, and Zac was inclined to agree.

There had been another large battle happening just a few hours before Zac arrived as well, though John was unsure who that had been between since no one disappeared from the ladder at that time. It had only lasted for less than thirty seconds though, so John thought it was a lopsided one.

But mostly there was a desperate fight for the top hundred in the Gatherer Ladder since that one would give out titles. Just being able to kill one or two cultivators could increase one's gathered wealth manifold, skyrocketing them up on the ladder. It was risky, but many of those remaining were willing to take that risk.

After Zac had found out everything he needed, he had crushed the token of John and sent him back to Earth. He didn't feel the need to steal his treasure as well since he was almost dead last in the Gatherer Ladder. But Zac also wouldn't let him stay here since he had tried to kill him.

There was one danger for everyone, though, not just those staying closer to the core. There were roving squads of Medhin warriors who even assaulted the outer rims in search of treasure. The Medhin emperor was truly insatiable and had ordered his soldiers to gather everything from animal parts to looting weaker cultivators to increase his wealth.

Zac snorted when he thought about the image of the Medhin emperor seeing himself get pushed down to second spot again, being unable to regain his position. The emperor was likely even scouring the trial ground for him. But Zac had no intention of meeting that old monster.

He was simply content to hunt the stronger beasts and find cultivators from Earth.

RATS AND CHAMPIONS

Zac wasn't overly worried about drawing the ire of Nenotheop Medhin. Part of the strength of the Medhin royals was their armies, and even if the emperor might be able to keep up with him using [**Loamwalker**], there was no way that the normal soldiers would.

After learning more about the situation, he resumed heading toward the central area. Since he wasn't climbing the mountains to loot the summit palaces this time around, he was making time, and in less than half a day, he passed almost as many mountains as he'd visited the first two weeks in the hunt.

He was staying away from the mountains altogether now that he knew the situation, instead opting to run through the middle of the valleys between. The monsters were extremely densely grouped there, and he also avoided other cultivators, who were more likely to stay closer to the mountains.

Beasts were constantly pouring at him, and he had unceasingly swung his arm back and forth for hours. Zac guessed that he'd already killed more beasts since returning compared to the whole week down in the caves. He wasn't even able to properly stop for dinner and instead kept swinging away while eating dried jerky with his free hand.

His guess had been correct about the strength of the animals. After he'd moved this far inland, the average power of the beasts was ten levels higher compared to the edge he'd started at. If this trend continued, then the innermost part of the hunting ground should be filled with beasts close to the bottleneck, perhaps even with a few E-grade alphas in the mix.

Zac really wanted to go there, but he also knew that was likely where the E-grade cultivators were stationed. He wasn't ready for that sort of

confrontation, so instead, he started veering toward the mountains, looking for people. However, this time, he was looking for people to set up alliances with rather than to gather information.

The mountains this far inside were more populated, and he quickly found a couple of cultivators, sometimes even small groups of them who stayed together to more efficiently hunt the valley beasts. Not everyone could be a one-man army who could freely roam the forests below without any worries for his life.

However, finding people that filled all the criteria wasn't quite as easy. They needed to not only be from Earth, but they also needed to be the leader of a town, unaffiliated to the New World Government, and also have a teleportation array. It was only after finding, or rather cornering, ten individuals or groups of people that he found someone who fit the bill.

It was one of the Scandinavians Zac had heard about during his first visit to the New World Government, and Jonas was surprisingly enthusiastic about entering the agreement. Zac was pleasantly surprised since he had been prepared to essentially force the alliance upon people.

But it turned out there was an incursion close by that they had a hard time keeping in check. The invading force kept growing stronger while they couldn't improve as fast. Zac simply told him to open the Teleporter for trusted people, and he would come by within a week after returning.

During the next hours, he managed to find three more people who fit the bill, though two of them weren't very close to any incursions. But at least it would increase his options and open up possible locations for new Thayer Consortia branch stores.

When everyone heard that he could provide shops with both better equipment and lower prices than the System-run stores, they were extremely enthusiastic. Good gear was still hard to come by since the stores in the system only provided extremely basic stuff, and it was extremely hard to gain equipment-gaining quests.

But the next target he found was pretty surprising. It was one of those ratlike things that Salvation had caught and turned into silver soldiers. At that time, Zac had thought they were something local, but now that he spotted a living one, he saw that it possessed ladder positions.

Zac grew extremely curious and hurried over to catch it. The Ratman possessed a Dexterity-based class, and it desperately tried to dodge Zac's pursuit. It even used its tail to change direction mid-leaps, but in the end, it

wasn't enough to escape from **[Loamwalker]**. Finally, it took out its token, but Zac was prepared and threw a rock that smashed into its wrist, making it drop it.

Zac flashed over and immediately snatched the token before resuming the pursuit. A minute later, he had cornered the Ratman against a cliff wall, and when it saw there was no escape, it looked at him with fear. It didn't say anything, but instead frantically gestured at Zac, but Zac had no idea what it was trying to convey.

"What are you doing? Can you speak?" Zac asked.

"Oh, you're one of the ones gifted with the language skills," the Ratman said with a decidedly feminine voice. "Please don't kill me. Your ladder position is so high, I won't make a difference. I have people relying on me back home."

"I won't kill you," Zac said. "But I am curious where home is. I haven't seen your kind before, and as far as I can tell, there are only participants from two worlds."

"I am from the world with different species. Ishiate, humans, and Zhix," the Ratman quickly said. "And I know who you are. You're the human champion of our world, Super Brother-Man."

"How do you know that?" Zac asked.

"Because we met the other species in the Tutorial. We also got a lot of them spawning with us afterward, but most of them are dead now..." she said. "I know about all the ladders."

Zac frowned as he looked at the fidgeting humanoid in front of him. It looked like the mystery of the missing people could be explained through this thing. But what did she mean by most being dead?

"Did your kind kill the humans?" Zac said as he let some of his aura leak out.

"No! We have lost most of our people as well! It's the incursion! Those crazy golems fill our tunnels and towns with magma, killing us by the millions sometimes," she quickly said.

"Explain," Zac said with a frown.

"Our kind lived underground before the integration. We've done so for thousands of years. This hunt is the first time I see the sky," she said and quickly explained her origin.

Apparently, they truly were Ratmen like Zac had initially expected. But they weren't always burrowers in their home world. A long time ago, their

sun started heating up, making life on the surface almost impossible. Decade by decade, it just got worse, and it was quickly becoming a mass extinction scenario.

First, they started to move their cities into caverns so that the mountains could shield them from the heat, but soon that wasn't enough. They kept burrowing deeper and deeper into their planet to escape, to the point that they soon were tens of kilometers below the surface. Their bodies changed to accommodate this life, and they soon shed their fur and gained excellent night vision.

The integration was somewhat of a relief for them, because the heat from the sun had kept creeping further and further down through the tunnels, and they could only dig so far before heat started rising from below as well. By the point that the integration took place, less than fifty million Ratmen remained alive, and they had become a minority in their own cavernous cities.

Chaos had taken hold of the underworld, with the Zhix essentially going to war with the other species. But soon it was all moot due to the incursion. It contained some sort of rockmen, though not the ones that had assaulted Port Atwood, it seemed. They all possessed fire-related classes and were comfortable living underground.

For the first months, the rockmen passively defended their territory as they stripped the ground of its resources, turning into pretty lucrative hunting targets. They gave far better rewards than killing the various beasts that lived in the underground cave systems. Killing and looting a rockman as it returned to deposit what it had mined would yield an enormous profit. No one had been interested in closing the incursion, and they only realized their mistake too late.

The fire golems hadn't been just mining about, but they had also been secretly digging massive tunnels all the way down to enormous pockets of lava. One day the whole world rumbled as the golems unleashed the lava upon the underground cities, causing massive casualties.

Now all four species were desperately fighting to close the incursion, but the lava had somehow empowered the golems, making the battle a losing one. Even now the remaining populations underground were desperately battling the golems so that they wouldn't be able to keep building those tunnels and lead even more lava toward them.

Zac was shocked that such a thing had taken place without anyone on the

surface having any idea. He was also surprised to hear that both Joker and Enigma were people from the underground and were the leaders of the human resistance. They had been consistently at the top of the ladders since the start, but no one had known their identities until now.

However, they weren't the only ones on the ladder. It turned out that the subterranean humans and Ishiate were heavily overrepresented on the Wealth Ladder. Greed, Little Treasure, and Smaug were all people from the underworld as well.

"Why haven't you built any teleportation arrays?" Zac asked with confusion. "It would allow you to flee up to the surface."

"We have, but we've never seen any arrays apart from our own. Now that I have a better picture of the situation, I think that either the distance is too long or that something is blocking us. We are surrounded by pockets of Nexus Crystals and other heavy elements we haven't seen before; perhaps that interferes somehow," she said with a shake of her head.

Zac's eyes widened, and an ember of greed ignited in his heart. It sounded like the underground was just a treasure trove waiting to be looted. There was also an incursion down there that needed to be closed.

"Hmm... I own a mine on the surface. I will see how far down it reaches, and place a teleportation array as far down as possible. Perhaps I will be able to reach you that way," Zac finally said. "Accept the alliance, and you will see if it works within a week after this is over."

"You're letting me go?" she hesitantly said as she quickly accepted the prompt for the alliance.

"I merely wanted to speak with you from the start, but when people see my ladder positions, they try to flee or crush their tokens. So I have to be a bit forceful, but I am only looking for allies right now. The incursions have killed enough of our people. The situation on the surface isn't much better than underground. But we will strike back as soon as this trial is over," Zac said.

She quickly nodded in agreement.

"I am Justa. I hope I will meet you again," she said as Zac started to walk away.

Zac nodded at her before he resumed his journey. He was pretty surprised at there being a fourth race on Earth, but he already knew it was a possibility since Julia had told him about the missing people all those months ago. In fact, the situation might be a big opportunity for Port Atwood. If he managed

to connect with the underground, there was a fortune to be made.

They were clearly loaded with crystals and precious metals underground, but they were lacking in many other things. If he could destroy the incursion, he could capitalize on the wealth and also work as the connection between the aboveground and the underworld. He could probably make a fortune in just transportation fees.

He resumed his relentless carnage in the valleys as he moved toward the next mountain, and he soon found himself back in his routine. As he searched for allies, he also encountered a few of the roving Medhin squads, but they were either quickly killed or sent back to their home world depending on how they acted.

Many of them had tried to quickly send off various skills into the air, and Zac guessed that the emperor had ordered them to quickly share their location if they found him or other important targets. But every action in that direction was met with a swift and decisive swing of the axe, quickly killing them.

However, the monotony of his grind didn't last forever. Suddenly, a shape barreled toward him from the forest crowns when he was in the middle of a valley. It was the first time he'd seen a cultivator this far into the woods, with most staying close to the mountains so that they had an avenue of retreat.

Zac frowned at the incoming man, but since his danger sense didn't give any signals, he held off on attacking. However, he did activate both his physical and mental defensive skills to prepare for anything. He also activated **[Inquisitive Eye]**, and while the information he received was pretty sparse, it was enough to identify this stranger.

It seemed that Beruv Ylvas had some business with him.

BERUV YLVAS

Zac didn't know what to make of the situation since the man who had stopped some distance away from him was one of the E-grade powerhouses in the hunt, and the leader of the Resistance against the Medhin Empire. But he did not really look like a powerhouse at the moment, but rather a war-torn refugee.

"I mean you no harm," the man said with a cough.

Zac frowned and took a second look at the man in front of him. He seemed to be in his fifties, though he might be older, as outward appearances weren't the best indicator of age any longer. He had long brown hair that was slightly graying at his temples, and it was held back in a leather hoop.

It was the same with his short beard that seemed to be the result of one month without shaving rather than some permanent style. He was a handsome man, but Zac was rather interested in the reason for his current state.

There were multiple dried spots of blood on his body, and even his aura was slightly erratic, signaling serious wounds. He was also pale from blood loss, and an almost sickly sheen covered his forehead. Zac had a strong suspicion that this was the result of killing Repubat Medhin a few days ago. Only a few others should be able to harm him like this.

"I am Beruv Ylvas from the planet Berum. I have been searching for you and a few others in hopes of entering an alliance against the Medhin. Judging by your clothes, you have no problem killing them," Beruv said with a pointed glance at the golden robes Zac wore.

Zac relaxed slightly since it seemed there would be no battle for now. He remembered that Beruv Ylvas was only level 80, but he should be far

stronger than the E-grade beasts he had encountered so far. Beruv must have done something spectacular since he was the strongest person from his original planet, just like he was the strongest person on Earth.

It also meant that he likely had a handful of the front-runner titles much like himself, making him stronger than just his level. He would prefer not to fight someone like this blind. So Zac kept his guard up in case he was planning a sneak attack for the wealth he had accumulated.

“I’m sorry, I understand that you have an irreconcilable enmity, but I do not have much to gain by risking my life against Nenotheop,” Zac warily said without turning off his defenses.

“I understand your position; you are already first on the Gatherer Ladder, and you don’t have much to gain by joining me. But I am willing to not only give up all the treasure we collect from the operation, but also half of my own,” Beruv continued.

Zac’s brows rose, and he had to admit he was slightly tempted. He had already made away with more treasure than he’d expected, but he was the head of a large force. Setting the foundations for a strong army and skilled craftsmen needed heavy investments, and this would be a huge help. The emperor should also hold the War Arrays that he had seen everyone from Medhin use, which he really wanted to get his hands on.

“It’s a generous offer, Mr. Berum, but why would you go so far to enlist me? You should know by now that I have not broken through to E-grade,” Zac said.

“I go by Ylvas. And I know you are not evolved, but I sense that you are far stronger than any other F-grade warrior I’ve met. You’re likely even stronger than the two sons of Nenotheop,” Ylvas said with a serious face. “My senses are telling me I might be in danger just by standing close to you.”

Zac surmised that Ylvas should have accumulated a decent chunk of Luck by his comment, and he guessed what he said made sense. However, Ylvas did not say that he was stronger than the emperor, which was telling of how strong that man was.

“Still, giving up that much wealth will set you back quite a bit. Why not simply take your treasure and cultivate? There will be other chances to kill the emperor,” Zac probed.

“Killing Nenotheop Medhin is extremely hard since either his position is unknown due to him exploring uninhabited lands, or he’s safe within his palaces. This place is the best chance for our resistance to kill him,” the man

said with another cough. “But most importantly, I refuse to become the fulcrum for that old goat.”

“The fulcrum?” Zac said with a frown, an ominous feeling growing in his heart.

“I managed to gather some intelligence when I killed Repubat Medhin. We have always wondered how the whole family could possess such power when the normal citizens of Medhin were completely unable to cultivate,” Ylvas said. “It turns out that some old monster called the Great Redeemer visited their planet thousands of years ago.”

“I’m sorry, did you say the Great Redeemer?” Zac exclaimed, not able to hide his shock.

“Yes. Why, do you know anything about him?” Ylvas said, his eyes thinning.

Zac hesitated for a second before he explained the events at the end of the battle with Salvation. Ylvas frowned as he listened to the story, and sighed after Zac was finished.

“It might not be a coincidence that it was our two worlds that were put together on this trial. It seems we both face the same problem,” he said with a shake of his head.

“Could you tell me what else you found out?” Zac asked.

“The Great Redeemer set up gathering arrays and taught the Medhin cultivation. Before he left, he gave them a task. They needed to completely dominate their planet before it was integrated. So the Medhin already knew about the integration and that their world would sooner or later become part of the Multiverse,” Ylvas said. “For thousands of years, they have waited and prepared.”

Zac, unfortunately, wasn’t too surprised when he heard the story since it was all too similar to things on his own planet. The Dominators seemed to have the same past, with the difference that their quest for world domination failed due to the rabid resistance of the Anointed and the Zhix hordes.

But he couldn’t completely connect the dots. It seemed that it was Salvation who had the connection with the Great Redeemer, but the terms fulcrum and the similarities were with the Dominators. Were the Dominators working together with Salvation? They shouldn’t have had any contact before the integration.

“What does fulcrum mean?” Zac asked.

“I am not completely sure, but it has something to do with the

Redeemer's plans. A few powerhouses seem necessary to use as focal points of arrays. I would be turned into an array flag essentially, and I would rather kill myself than see that happen. But if I die, then they will choose someone else," Ylvas said with fury smoldering in his eyes.

"Turned into an array flag...?" Zac muttered with disgust.

That sounded like an extremely sinister method, and it wasn't something that was mentioned in the Array Crystal in his possession. Worse yet, if that was how the arrays were created, then the array itself couldn't be anything good either.

But that begged the question of why the Great Redeemer put in all that effort. Ogras had already told him that finding inhabited planets that weren't yet integrated was like searching for a needle in a haystack. However, the Great Redeemer had actually found at least two and initiated the same plan for both of them.

It was not a good feeling to know that some old monster might have a vested interest in his planet. But Zac couldn't figure out the reason. New planets certainly had a lot of valuable things, but there was simply not enough wealth to make an old monster traverse the cosmos and scheme for thousands of years.

"Do you know what the Great Redeemer is planning?" Zac asked.

"No idea. I don't think even Repubat himself knew. Either Nenotheop keeps that secret to himself, or perhaps none of them know what's truly going on. The only thing Repubat knew was that the Great Redeemer called the people of the world 'fuel,' and that the Medhin would be taken to a cultivator's paradise for fulfilling their task," Ylvas said with a shake of his head.

"Fuel?" Zac repeated with trepidation.

That obviously couldn't be good news.

"Have you figured out anything to stop this?" Zac asked.

"I can't be sure, but I have formed a hypothesis. Why did the Great Redeemer visit our planets thousands of years ago? Why did he give a family cultivation manuals? I believe he has formed a Karmic Link with those who use that cultivation technique, and he now uses that link as a means to locate our planets," Ylvas explained.

"Doesn't he already know where our planets are?" Zac asked skeptically.

"I mean, he's already been there before."

"He only knows where the planets were previously. But the integration

fused and moved them. We might not even be in the same part of space any longer,” Ylvas said with a shake of his head. “Our planets are shrouded by the System for a hundred years, but I think he has found the means to get around that.”

“You’re right,” Zac said, feeling a bit stupid. “You’re thinking that if you manage to kill all the members of the Medhin Clan, you will sever that Karmic Link, making the Great Redeemer lose track of your planet.”

“Exactly,” Ylvas said with a nod. “I think this might be our last chance. If the emperor is still alive when we return, I will have no way to kill him. Their capital is a fortress with extremely strong arrays and legions of soldiers. That’s why I am willing to make that deal. Help me kill him, and half the treasure I have accumulated is yours. I would give my points as well, but they are not transferrable,” Ylvas entreated.

Zac was pretty tempted, but he didn’t immediately reply. Beruv Ylvas was on the fifth position on the Wealth Ladder, so the treasures he had accumulated shouldn’t be small. But Zac needed to be alive to enjoy them. He needed to be careful. This wasn’t as simple as a two-on-one assault. Even discounting the emperor’s personal guard, there was also his son, another E-grade powerhouse who had a comparable level to Beruv Ylvas.

“I can sympathize with you, but I am not sure about this. It would probably not just be us versus Nenotheop. There are also his son and their War Arrays,” Zac said.

“I believe we do not need to worry about Vasidas. Our spies indicate that the two are at odds and that Vasidas might even be planning a coup. If we assault the emperor, Vasidas will likely stay on the sidelines, perhaps only appearing after his father is dead to kill us if he sees there’s an opportunity,” Ylvas said.

“So we would be doing his work for him?” Zac said with a thoughtful nod.

“Also, it would not only be the two of us. I have gathered a few hundred cultivators of Berum who are currently lying in wait. They will help lessen the pressure from the army. Unfortunately, we do not possess as good War Arrays, and I therefore need the assistance of another powerhouse,” Ylvas added.

“My plan would be that you stay hidden inside my army, and before they realize who you are, you need to strike at the Emyrean Guard and kill as many as possible. That’s the elite force of Nenotheop and the source of his

War Array,” Ylvas said. “I will hold the focus of the emperor himself, and after the array is dealt with, we will pincer him.”

Zac nodded thoughtfully. Having an army on his side would make things easier, and the plan Ylvas proposed was one where Ylvas himself did the heavy lifting. If Zac managed to get close to such an elite squad while the emperor himself was occupied, he should be able to make short work of them all.

But Zac couldn’t discount the possibility that Beruv Ylvas was lying through his teeth just to enlist some help in his quest to kill his nemesis. It was worth remembering that if they managed to kill the Medhin emperor and his son, then Beruv Ylvas would be the strongest man on their planet.

But there were two days to go, and Zac did not really have anything to do apart from grinding some beasts. He could check things out and gather intelligence to see if the plan would be viable or not.

“I do not have anything against working together,” Zac finally said. “But if I feel it’s too dangerous to complete, I will back away. I am sorry, but I’m not ready to risk it all against Medhin Nenotheop.”

“That’s all I can ask for,” Beruv Ylvas said with a nod of relief and stretched out his hand. “To a successful cooperation.”

Zac hesitated slightly before he turned off [**Nature’s Barrier**], which had swirled around him all the while, and grasped the other man’s hand.

“To a successful cooperation.”

THE E-GRADE

Since the two had agreed to work together provisionally, the slightly tense situation had abated somewhat at least. Zac chose not to reactivate his defensive skill, though he still kept **[Mental Fortress]** active. However, there was one issue that was weighing on Zac as he looked at the slightly wretched form of the Berum champion.

“I am sorry, but your current condition is a bit... Will you even be able to fight like you are now?” Zac probed.

The man truly looked worse for wear, and he didn't inspire much confidence as a potential combat partner.

“I know my shape does not inspire much confidence at the moment. Repubat injured me in a last desperate assault, and the attack was filled with his Dao. That attack weakened me and drastically slowed my natural healing,” Ylvas said with a slightly helpless shake of his head.

Zac nodded knowingly since he had personally been on the receiving end of such an attack: the poison wound from the Corpselord. That wound had refused to heal no matter how many pills he ate. Dao wounds were simply far harder to heal, and if that was what ailed Beruv Ylvas, their plan might be doomed before they even started.

“However, I have already pushed out the foreign Dao from my body, and my body is currently rapidly healing. My plan is for us to assault the emperor's mountain on the last day after I've completely healed. Hopefully, we will be able to thin out his forces by hunting the roving squads until then. That way, we would weaken their side while gathering information,” Ylvas quickly added after seeing Zac's troubled face.

“Sounds good,” Zac agreed.

If what Ylvas said was true about his wound, then Zac would be able to observe a rapid restoration during the next day. If he still looked wretched at that point, then he was lying about his condition. Waiting a few days to assault Nenothep would also allow him to focus on his goal to hunt beasts and find more potential allies.

“But one condition. I am looking for people from my world to ally with. You can’t kill them,” Zac added.

“I have no interest in fighting them, especially not in my current condition,” Ylvas agreed without hesitation. “Do you think they would be amenable to working with us?”

“I doubt it, to be honest,” Zac admitted. “I only have a few friends strong enough that they could help out. In general, our world is far more splintered than yours seems to be. In fact, when we find people, you should stay out of sight so no rumors of us working together have a chance to spread.”

“Agreed.” Ylvas nodded. “I have to say I am a bit surprised you are still looking for allies when you’re the strongest human on your planet. I would have expected them to approach you by now.”

“Well, it’s a bit complicated,” Zac said with a sigh. “For one, I got randomized to an island in some remote corner of our planet. The only way for me to find other people is to use my teleportation array, and no one keeps their arrays public when the world is in chaos. There have also been some false rumors about me floating about.”

“I pray you will be able to unify your world quickly, Mr. Atwood. I have seen the aftermath of those you call the Dominators in this hunt. They are bloodthirsty and even stronger than the Medhin Clan. You will need many allies to bring them down,” Ylvas said with a serious face as he started walking toward the central area.

Zac only nodded and followed in tow. Since Ylvas was hurt, he avoided battle as much as possible, leaving the task of clearing a path to Zac. Since Zac’s goal was to grind beasts, he didn’t mind, and he soon was back to his routine of clearing out beasts by the dozen.

However, since a stranger was traveling with him, he held back his power to a pretty large degree. He didn’t use **[Loamwalker]**, and the length of the fractal edge he displayed was only three meters long. He didn’t even launch it at packs, not wanting to provide the intelligence that he could use ranged attacks. Finally, he refrained from using any Dao, not that it was really needed in any case against some random beasts.

It might have been overkill, but after months of listening to tales of betrayal from Ogras, it was pretty much by instinct that he tried to avoid leaking any critical information about himself. Ylvas did not speak much either, apart from sometimes making some random conversation.

It turned out that the planet of Berum wasn't completely devoid of Cosmic Energy before the integration, in contrast to Earth. Their world had been essentially medieval, and there had been a few people who had the "Gift." It wasn't nearly as pronounced as now that the world was integrated, but those with the Gift could be a few times stronger than normal people.

Beruv Ylvas was one of these people, and it seemed he had been some sort of general or royal protector in their old world, though it seemed he was unaffiliated now. Zac didn't probe into that subject since it seemed a bit delicate. Ylvas had started at level 23, and he'd received his class inside the Tutorial after only two days.

The reason Ylvas grew so strong was a mix of reasons. He had a head start, and since he already was an experienced warrior, he underwent very hard missions in the Tutorial. He had then distinguished himself in the quickly escalating wars against the Medhin Empire, and he quickly became a symbol of the resistance.

Many had voluntarily provided him with treasures such as Attribute Fruits or Nexus Crystals in hopes that he would get powerful enough to defeat the Medhin emperor. The world of Berum had celebrated in the streets when they learned that he was the first warrior to pass the bottleneck, which was the first step in resisting the monstrously powerful royals.

"So what's the difference between E-grade and F-grade?" Zac suddenly asked after a bit.

It was a subject he was pretty interested in, especially now that he was closing in on the bottleneck himself. He actually knew less about the E-grade compared to the D-grade, since he at least knew that you formed a core at that stage. He had asked Alyn about it, but she had refused to talk about the subject, citing that one shouldn't get ahead of oneself.

"Hmm... Well, most importantly, you get far more attributes per level," Ylvas said after mulling it over. "I gain almost ten times the attributes per level now."

Zac already knew that the E-grade provided much larger gains per level, but he was still shocked by the sheer number of attributes. It was no wonder that he'd had such trouble with Inevitability. Even if the Dominator only had

an Uncommon class, they would have gained over 1500 attributes between the levels 75 and 100.

He finally understood what Ogras meant when he said that the low-tiered titles that gave flat boosts would be mostly useless at the end of E-grade. Even with his huge number of titles, his accumulated bonus flat attributes were only worth something like five levels in the E-grade.

“But leveling is harder,” Ylvas added with a sigh.

“Well, hasn’t that been the case since the start?” Zac asked as he dragged himself out of his musings. “Every level requires more Cosmic Energy.”

“It’s not only that,” Ylvas said with a shake of his head. “To gain a level now, it’s not enough to gather up enough Cosmic Energy through kills or cultivation. You also need to break open a node in your body.”

“A node?” Zac asked, but suddenly remembered the mention in the introduction to formations.

It had said that minor nodes existed in the body, helping the two major nodes, which were the Spirit Gate and the Cosmic Core. It hadn’t explained exactly what they were, though, only mentioning that they contained power.

“It is like a mini-bottleneck. There are spots all through your pathways that need to be awakened, and each node gives you a level. Every time you break open a node, it feels like you break a chain shackling you. Cosmic Energy flows smoother through your pathways, and your body feels lighter,” Ylvas continued. “From what I’ve gathered, there are seventy-five ordinary nodes, but also a few hidden ones.”

“Hidden?” Zac asked with interest, even turning over toward Ylvas while he kept swinging to mow down beasts in front of them.

“Yes, apparently, it’s special nodes that do not give levels but instead great increases in power. The truly gifted can sometimes open one, or even a few. But it’s not needed to evolve to the next stage,” Ylvas continued. “As to the method to find and open these hidden nodes, I have no idea.”

“So they give free attributes like titles?” Zac asked.

“No, from what I understand, they give things that are harder to quantify. One might make your sight and reaction far better. Another makes you more in tune with the Dao. That’s just examples I’ve made up myself, though; the Tutorial pixies didn’t give any information, and I couldn’t afford information about those things,” Ylvas explained. “It also seems that different people have different hidden nodes.”

“How come?” Zac asked, confused.

“Bloodlines and constitution,” Ylvas said. “This is something that does not apply to most people. But some clans and races have special bloodlines, and these bloodlines may contain special hidden nodes that give specific powers. Other people have somehow gained special constitutions that have special nodes. A fire constitution might have a hidden node that helps the cultivator come in tune with flames, for example, or even form it within one’s body naturally.”

Zac nodded thoughtfully. The talk of bloodlines made his mind turn toward his own heritage. At first look it might seem pretty normal, but in truth, it was anything but. His mother was a lofty Technocrat, and such a group might possess special bloodlines.

There was also his newly gained Draugr heritage, and such a species might very well have some hidden nodes to help with miasmatic cultivation. That would explain their superior handling of the death-attuned energy. Zac’s heartbeat sped up in anticipation, but he quickly cooled his mind.

Even if he might possess special nodes, he had no idea how to access them. He had no connection with the Technocrats, and he was afraid to even try to contact them as things were now. If they found out about the thing inside Kenzie, it might lead to untold troubles for her, so he even prayed that their existence had been forgotten by their mother and her people.

It was the same with the Draugr, and he was a bit leery about that as well after hearing Ylvas speculations regarding Karmic Links. What if the Draugr woman did not act out of benevolence, but for very different reasons? Planting those runes inside his head might be a way to form a Karmic Link, which would allow her to find the splinter from the **[Heart of Oblivion]**.

She had mentioned that he walked on the Path of Oblivion, which indicated that she was familiar with the **[Heart of Oblivion]**. And he wouldn’t have been taken to her place if she had no connection to a splinter since all the other visions were connected to the **[Heart of Oblivion]**. Perhaps she was collecting splinters for herself.

But he would definitely look into these hidden nodes when he got back since he had other avenues to find information. There were Brazla and the inheritances, both prime sources for such information. Perhaps it would be possible to buy a dossier about common hidden nodes through Calrin as well.

“So the max level for E-grade is level 150, then?” Zac asked after he had digested the information.

“Yes, that’s correct,” Ylvas confirmed. “Every node is harder to open,

and from what I've understood, most cultivators simply do not have the talent to open up all seventy-five of them. The majority get stuck on the road of breaking open the nodes even before reaching the real bottleneck of forming a Cultivator's Core."

After asking a bit more, he learned that the method to open the nodes was to grind them down with the help of one's cultivation technique and Dao. This made Zac frown with worry, since he simply had no cultivation manual to utilize, and it seemed the Dao alone wouldn't work.

Of course, there were other ways as well. Some pills and treasures could be utilized. But they often came with side effects and were generally only used when you were right at the end and just needed a final push to get to 75 nodes.

Zac frowned when he learned of the different ways to level up. The pills and treasures that could open up nodes would likely not be too easy to come by, and such treasures usually only worked once like the Fruit of Ascension. Was there truly no way for a mortal to advance without the help of treasures, though? He knew that the path of progression for mortals was harder, but it shouldn't be closed off like that.

"Is there truly no other way to open up the nodes?" Zac couldn't help asking.

"Well, there is one more way," Ylvas answered after some hesitation. "But it is a bit suicidal."

PITS AND TRACKS

Suicidal wasn't really what Zac wanted to hear, but he internally sighed and indicated for Ylvas to explain what he meant.

"From what I understand, you can brute-force the nodes as well. That's what some try when they are all out of options. You can see every level as an empty glass. When you cultivate or kill enemies, you fill the glass with water, and you can keep doing this until it is filled," Ylvas began.

Zac nodded, since the explanation was pretty much the same as how he imagined it, though he rather saw it as an experience bar from a video game. When the bar was filled up, he would need to level up. Otherwise, he wouldn't gain any more experience.

"When the glass is full of water, you need to open up another node; in other words, get another glass to fill. Until you do, the water will just spill over the edge and not stay with you. Until you break through, the Cosmic Energy will dissipate out from your body.

"But you can also forcibly trap the energy inside your body until the accumulated energy bursts the node right open by force. However, using that method is to dance with death. The more nodes you open, the more energy you need, and your body simply might not be able to handle it. The glass of water would shatter from getting too much water crammed into it. In other words, your body would explode.

"And even if you succeed, your body will be severely wounded, and you will need to recuperate for a long time afterward. If you include the recovery period, it's likely faster to just be patient and slowly grind the node open with your cultivation," Ylvas added with a shake of his head. "Besides, you would need to kill an ungodly number of beasts or waste a massive wealth on

crystals to accumulate enough energy to force open the nodes, far more than just filling up the glass.”

Zac shook his head when he understood how the last method worked. It seemed inferior to the others, working more or paying a fortune for worse results. It looked like the difference between a mortal and cultivator would start to make itself truly known in E-grade. Zac wouldn't be surprised if it only got worse in the higher grades as well. He really needed to figure out a way to become a cultivator himself.

But he also had to say that he felt he was pretty suited for such a method. Not only was his body extremely sturdy due to his high Endurance and Vitality, but he also had another important advantage. His body had been tempered by far worse conditions not once, but twice before.

First was when he jumped into the Cosmic Water and ate the Fruit of Ascension, his body had been ripped to shreds and reformed countless times by the two energies within his body. The second time was when his Duplicity Core was formed from killing far too many Zombies. That time his body was instead ravaged by life- and death-attuned energy.

Hopefully, those two harrowing experiences would help him out as he brute-forced his nodes open because he did not see many alternatives for him to advance in the future.

The two kept moving through the forests toward the area where the Berum forces were stationed. Apparently, they were spread out and hidden in caves on four different mountains. The resistance leader had also luckily mapped out the areas with both the emperor and where the two Dominators had been seen recently.

The emperor had set up camp right in the core, claiming a handful of mountains as his own. The two Dominators seemed to move around a bit more haphazardly, though they stayed in the same general area. The two forces had also avoided each other until now, which Zac and Ylvas could explain now that they had a better picture of the situation. In a sense, they were part of the same force.

The only reason that Zac didn't turn away then and there was the fact that the Dominators didn't seem to be completely harmonious with the Medhin Empire. While the Dominators avoided the royals, Ylvas seemed to be under the impression that they killed even more Medhin soldiers than they killed people from any other force. Perhaps things were a bit cut-throat between the various factions under the Great Redeemer.

They weren't in a hurry to head right over, though, since Ylvas was still hurt and they needed information, so they stayed a decent distance away from the mountain grouping that the Medhin army controlled. Zac spent most of the day hunting beasts apart from when they went looking for Medhin squads.

Everything went according to plan, and Zac even made two new alliances thanks to Ylvas' map and his scouting skills. However, things took a bad turn after catching a Medhin squad.

"What did you say?" Zac said as he lifted the final living soldier by his throat in anger.

"Crown Prince Vasidas has captured the woman called Thea Marshall, and she is now held by the side of the great Emperor Nenotheop. The emperor promises she is untouched and unspoiled, and that she will be released upon the forfeiture of your ladder position. This offer only lasts until twelve hours before the hunt ends, at which point Thea will be executed," the soldier wheezed out, clearly having been forced to memorize that exact speech.

Zac's thoughts were in chaos, and he blankly stared ahead, unsure of what he should do. Suddenly, a white flash went past him, and the head of the captured soldier fell to the ground with a thump. Zac frowned and looked over at Ylvas, who had already sheathed the thin rapier that hung by his side.

"I feared he was trying to stall for time to announce our whereabouts," Ylvas quickly explained when he saw Zac's displeasure.

Zac wasn't too sure about that motivation, but he wouldn't make a big deal about it. He understood why Ylvas wanted the captive to stop talking, and Zac honestly wasn't sure what he should do at this point.

"Is she your ally?" Ylvas said as he looked over at Zac.

"Yeah," Zac simply answered with a somber nod.

Zac sighed in defeat. This very situation was the reason why he had struggled so hard to find his sister as quickly as possible. The worst thing was that he couldn't comply even if he wanted to due to the splinter hidden away in his brain. He could give his whole Cosmos Sack to the emperor and still maintain his position, and the emperor probably wouldn't believe his excuses.

He honestly would have been happy to dump the **[Heart of Oblivion]** on the old emperor, especially if it helped save Thea. But now it had caused even more trouble for him instead. It truly was a cursed object.

"You cannot make any deals with the Medhin. Both the emperor and

Vasidas will turn on you the minute they have what they want,” Ylvas quickly said. “They barely consider anyone human, apart from their own family members.”

“I know,” Zac said. “But it still makes our job harder.”

“I don’t think it changes things. The emperor must keep her alive to lure you in, but we can simply pretend you don’t know about the situation. We’ll keep hunting squads and weaken their forces,” Ylvas said.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea anymore,” Zac said. “If certain squads start dropping now, they might realize someone is coming for them, losing our small element of surprise. It would give our position away.”

“Fair enough,” Ylvas said.

“Thea is one of the three strongest cultivators of our world,” Zac slowly said. “Freeing her would also bolster our forces. I will quickly set her free first while you occupy the emperor. After that, I’ll hit the personal guard as planned.”

Beruv Ylvas seemed to consider the options for a bit until he slowly nodded.

“That works as well. However, you must hurry. I am not a match against Nenotheop in an even fight, and if he’s empowered by his personal guard, I will not even last for thirty seconds. You quickly need to dispatch the personal guard and help me lessen the burden or I will fall,” Ylvas said.

“Agreed,” Zac said.

It truly seemed that there was no getting off this train now. The emperor and his son had forced his hand. Anger was starting to build up inside him as he kept killing the beasts around them, but he forced himself to keep calm. He couldn’t do something hotheaded that risked both the operation and Thea’s life at this juncture.

So he tried to maintain his calm as the two went back to traveling between the mountains to look for allies and beasts. But an odd sight suddenly entered their eyes. As they traveled, they spotted a huge pit in front of them. At first, Zac assumed someone had dug a trap for the beasts.

However, as soon as they walked over, they could quickly discount that possibility. While the pit was over ten meters deep, there was no evidence suggesting that they had found a trap. There were no spikes in the bottom, and the walls weren’t sheer, so even a normal human would be able to simply walk out of the pit.

The two kept walking, and after thirty more minutes, they had lost count

of how many pits they'd seen. Both were completely befuddled at this point, and it even started to make them a bit uncomfortable. They truly couldn't understand what was going on, and it almost felt like they were walking into a trap somehow.

"Animals?" Zac finally ventured with an unsure voice. "Like rats or moles."

"No, these are man-made," Ylvas said. "They are simple holes going straight down. There's no burrows or tunnels either, so they would serve no purpose for shelter. But I do not understand why someone would dig so many holes. Burying array flags? But then the holes should be filled and hidden afterward..."

"Tracks over here," Ylvas suddenly said as he looked at the ground. "Some huge bugger by the size of the footprints, weighing at least 150 kilos, likely more."

Zac readied his weapons as the two silently followed the footprints for another fifteen minutes. Luckily, due to the size of the one who left the prints, they had no problem following them, even if Ylvas whispered that they were a few hours old.

Oddly enough, they didn't lead toward a mountain, but rather straight into the core of a large forest in an extra-wide valley, and weirder still was that there were no animals around. Since they had entered the zone with the pits, there had been fewer and fewer beasts. Zac started to worry that one of the Dominators had moved its camp and scared away all the wildlife.

Suddenly, they heard a thundering sound from the distance, and both of them quickly got ready for battle. But they soon realized the noise was actually snoring, and they speechlessly looked at each other. Zac immediately guessed who it was, and he wryly smiled as they followed the tracks until they looked at a shoddily camouflaged camp.

Someone had simply broken off a few smaller trees and put them in a circle around a clearing. But the cover wasn't high enough, and the two of them could easily see the ramshackle structure in the middle. Two enormous feet were sticking out of a much too small cover made out of sticks, and the thundering snoring came from the man inside.

"Stay here for now. I know who this is. He's an ally, but a bit special. He is also quite strong, so if we can get his help, we will have a great array breaker on our side," Zac said as he started to approach the crudely built tent.

"Billy, are you awake?" Zac said as he poked Billy's feet with a stick he

picked up. "It's me, Zachary. Super Brother-Man."

The snores continued for a while until they abruptly stopped. Billy rose from his slumber, causing the whole campsite to collapse in splinters and broken twigs.

"WHO WOKE BILLY?" Billy growled as his eyes wildly looked about.

In his hand was the huge club he'd seen him wear before, looking like a tree trunk with an enormous cranium stuck at the end.

"It's me, Billy. Zachary, Super Brother-Man," Zac tentatively said as he threw away his poking stick.

"Oh, it's you," Billy said with a snort after he spotted Zac. "I am mad at you."

BILLY AND ALIEN-MAN

“What? Why?” Zac asked with some confusion as he looked up at the irate giant.

He hadn’t done anything to Billy as far as he knew, and he had even gone so far as to send his forces to help him close out the Ratmen incursion.

“Your stupid horny friend tricked Billy. Made Billy thwunk the big shield and the biggest rat. But the horny guy jumped out of the shadows and stole Billy’s money and strength,” Billy muttered and slammed his club into the ground in frustration, making the whole area shake.

Zac blankly stared at Billy for a second before he could translate what Billy meant. It appeared that old habits died hard, and Ogras had actually stolen the kill of the incursion leader when they had assaulted the incursion together.

Zac sighed in exasperation at the demon’s antics, but he was also a bit confused. Ogras was stuck at the bottleneck as far as he knew, so killing an incursion leader would be a waste of Cosmic Energy. It would have been far better if the energy went to Billy instead, bolstering the strength of an ally. Since it seemed both Billy and Ogras were able to kill the Ratman, it was unlikely it had been an E-grade powerhouse, but it would still likely have given Billy at least one level.

The only reason that Zac could come up with was that there was some hidden benefit for the demon to perform such an action. Perhaps he could receive a title if he managed to be the one to kill a competing incursion leader. But in any case, such an action could put a strain on the alliance, especially when the other side was someone like Billy.

“I’m sorry, Billy. Ogras is a bit stupid. I will make him give some good

things to you as an apology when we go back,” Zac said, which brightened the giant right up. “And, uh, it’s called horned, not horny. What are you doing here?” Zac followed up as he looked at the surroundings a bit skeptically.

He had actually almost forgotten Billy was in this hunt due to his less than stellar ladder positions. Billy was below the top 100 of the Hunter Ladder, which was surprisingly low considering his strength, and his Gatherer placement was just abysmal. He wasn’t even in the top 1,000.

“Billy looking for treasure while hiding,” the giant said and looked around before bending over toward Zac. “Nigel told me the big secret of the hunt. There are big evil bosses in here. If Billy manages to hide from all big bosses until he gets sent back, then he gets a BIG bonus reward.”

Zac gaped at the hogwash that came out of Billy’s mouth. Nigel had obviously been worried about Billy doing something reckless, and tricked him to stay safe with the promise of rewards.

“Yes, I heard something like that as well.” Zac coughed. “You are doing a good job.”

“This hunt is so hard, Billy has looked for treasure everywhere, but there’s no treasure. Thwonking animals instead is easier, gives you money and makes you stronger.” The giant sighed. “But all animals keep running away from Billy.”

Zac frowned in confusion when Billy told him that there were no treasures. It didn’t really matter which palace he had visited; they were all filled with a decent amount of valuables. Of course, most had likely been looted at this point, but to not find almost anything for a month was exceedingly unlucky.

As for the reason why the animals ran away from Billy, it wasn’t as big a mystery. The giant’s aura was completely unrestrained as it billowed out from him. Zac was surprised how heavy it was. He knew that Ogras had told him Billy was very strong, but the aura that emanated from him was far greater compared to when they’d met during the auction. But Zac wouldn’t pry since it was rude to look into others’ fortuitous encounters.

“Did you not find anything in the palaces? On top of the mountains?” Zac probed.

“Billy did not go there. Billy went once and was attacked by ghosts. Billy ain’t going up there again,” the giant said with eyes as big as saucers. “Mama told Billy that treasure is always buried, hidden by pirates. Billy has no

treasure map, so Billy has been digging all over the forest. But Billy has been unlucky and not looted a single treasure chest.”

Billy then gestured at a few pits not far away, and Zac was stunned silent. Zac had no idea how to speak with this simple giant. For one, he didn’t know if he should even tell Billy about how the hunt worked this late into the game, but he also was unsure whether he would even be able to explain it in a way so that Billy would understand.

“Nigel didn’t come as well?” Zac asked, hoping for some help from the translator.

“Nigel is stupid. Billy even had an extra ticket, but Nigel was scared,” Billy said with a disdainful shake of his head. “Nigel said he will help make Billyville better while Billy hunts. Nigel sold the ticket instead.”

Zac nodded thoughtfully as he gazed at the giant. His initial idea when he realized it was Billy who stayed here had been to invite him to help in the fight against the Medhin, but he wasn’t sure anymore. It felt like he would trick Billy into risking his life in a feud that wasn’t really his.

“What are you doing here?” Billy suddenly asked, as if remembering that Zac had appeared out of nowhere.

After a brief hesitation, Zac decided to tell Billy the truth.

“A very strong bad guy has taken Thea Marshall a prisoner. I am going with a few friends to beat him up and help Thea,” Zac said.

“Bad guys have taken Thea?” Billy said, immediately looking angered.

“You know Thea?” Zac asked, a bit curious.

“Thea gave Billy lots of tasty things after the auction; she is Billy’s friend. Billy will come with you and thwunk the bad guys,” Billy said without skipping a beat. “Besides, Mama always says you need to help those in need.”

Zac slowly nodded in agreement before he started hesitating again.

“The bad guy is Nenotheop Medhin, an emperor from the other world we are doing this hunt with,” Zac started to explain, but was cut off by Billy.

“Other world? What?” Billy asked with a vacant stare.

“Uh, never mind. Anyway, Nenotheop is very strong. He has evolved to E-grade. Do you know about E-grade?” Zac tentatively asked.

“Yes, Nigel said that after level 75, you get very strong. That is E-grade.” Billy nodded with a serious face. “But as long as he has a head, Billy can thwunk it.”

“Good. We will trick him a bit first, though. You and I are smart, and we

will trick the bad guys. We will work together to save Thea. Then we will all thwunk the bad guys together, okay?” Zac said.

“Good!” Billy enthusiastically nodded and even slammed the enormous club on the ground with enough power to cause cracks tens of meters long to spread out from the camp.

The two were soon joined by Ylvas, who clearly had some trouble adapting to Billy’s mannerisms. But soon enough, they were back on track, heading toward the hidden camp of the Berum forces. However, Billy’s aura and fighting style proved to be somewhat of a problem since there seemed to be no moderation to his methods.

“Are you sure this is okay? Your friend is a bit... impulsive,” Ylvas said with a low voice as he watched Billy rove forward like a natural disaster, each swing of the monstrous club causing everything from beasts to huge boulders to turn into small chunks on the ground.

“He is a bit simple, but he has the highest Strength of anyone on our planet as far as I know, apart from the Dominators perhaps,” Zac whispered back. “Every aspect of him is designed for heavy hits. He effortlessly broke an array in one swing that my number one general wouldn’t even be able to break no matter the time given. He is also good friends with the captured woman, so I wanted to let him make his own decision.”

Ylvas thoughtfully nodded as he looked at the huge club ripping through the air back and forth. It clearly was incredibly heavy, but Billy’s bulging arms didn’t even seem to strain as it tore through the air.

“Fair point. The Medhin squads always allocate at least a third of their men to erect barriers to protect those who use the War Arrays. If this man can crack open the array for the personal guard, allowing you to slip in, our chances would become far better,” Ylvas agreed. “Only one day remains until the time for our assault. I suggest we head toward the closest base by now. But first we need to teach this man to be more circumspect.”

“Agreed.” Zac nodded, and soon they stopped and called over Billy.

After some explaining, or rather bribing with large slabs of grilled meat, Zac managed to get Billy to take a break from his clobbering. Instead, he took over and dispatched the beasts in a more silent way.

“Billy don’t like that fighting way. Reminds Billy of your horny friend,” Billy muttered when he saw Zac trying to kill the animals as quietly as possible.

“Horned friend, Billy. And I agree, I don’t like fighting like this either.

But remember, you told me we needed to stay hidden for the big reward. If we make a lot of noise, we might be found and lose the reward,” Zac explained.

Billy’s eyes widened in realization, and he quickly nodded in agreement.

“Super Brother-Man is pretty smart. Almost as smart as Billy.” He sagely nodded in agreement as he started to walk on his toes in an effort not to make any sound.

“Indeed, Super Brother-Man truly seems to be almost as smart as Billy.” Ylvas nodded from the side in a rare showing of humor.

“Ha ha, I like you, Alien-man!” Billy laughed.

When they had explained that Ylvas came from another world, Billy had immediately called them both liars, explaining that aliens were much smaller and had large black eyes. Finally, the two had been forced to give up explaining Ylvas’ origins, but Billy still chose to call Ylvas Alien-man as a joke.

“Alien-man is pretty good at hiding skills,” Zac said, ignoring the comments. “He can teach Billy to hide. Imagine tricking the bad guys that you are weak when you are actually strong. This will also trick animals, making it easier for you to thwunk them.”

Billy enthusiastically nodded, and Ylvas started to arduously teach Billy how to control and hide his aura. Surprisingly, as soon as Billy understood what Ylvas wanted him to do, his aura immediately and utterly disappeared. The change was so drastic that Zac actually stopped killing beasts and turned, afraid that Ylvas had assassinated Billy.

But Billy was just fine, though he didn’t emit a smidgeon of energy. Unless Zac didn’t know better, he would have thought that the man was a level 1 mortal from how his aura felt.

“He has magnificent control of his Cosmic Energy,” Ylvas muttered in shock. “I can’t sense a thing. I think the man might actually be a genius when it comes to energy control.”

“He didn’t get to the top ten on two of our ladders due to blind luck,” Zac said with a smile. “Billy, amazing.”

“Why surprised? Billy is the smartest. Mama always says so,” the giant said, obviously extremely pleased by Zac’s and Ylvas’ reactions.

“Remember how you did this,” Zac said. “See, beasts are already storming toward us.”

It was true. Only a few moments had passed since Billy took control of

his aura, and the more rabid beasts were already closing in on them.

“In the future, if you want to thwunk things, always hide your aura this way. That way, you don’t need to run after the animals. They will come to you,” Zac said as he resumed swinging.

Since the matter of subterfuge was somewhat dealt with, they immediately started to head toward the hideout. They no longer sought out any more cultivators, and Ylvas even scouted ahead to make sure they didn’t encounter anyone. They completely rounded a few squads and stayed clear of all the mountains until they finally arrived at a nondescript decorative mountain with an enormous statue at the top.

However, getting Billy to ascend the mountain wasn’t completely effortless. They finally had to say that the ghosts didn’t come to the mountains with statues on top. Of course, it was true in a sense since the decorative mountains did not have gathering arrays making the energies dense.

They walked along a hidden path almost halfway up the mountain until they reached a dead end. However, Ylvas simply walked straight through the wall, making Billy’s eyes widen in shock.

“Alien-man is magic,” Billy muttered with wide eyes.

A SINGULAR GOAL

“It’s an illusion array,” Zac explained but corrected himself after seeing Billy’s confused face. “A magic trick. There is actually no wall there; we can go through as well.”

Zac also passed through a few times to prove his point, and Billy finally followed suit as well with wonder in his eyes. After passing through the array, they entered a cavern that reminded Zac of the underground tunnels. Billy curiously poked the luminescent moss covering the roof and even started collecting it until Ylvas explained it wasn’t worth any money.

“No guards or scouts?” Zac asked Ylvas as they walked through the empty tunnel.

“We felt it was too risky having people placed outside the illusion array since it would likely increase the chances of this place being found out. We, unfortunately, lost one of our hideouts and fifty good men that way to one of the insectoids,” Ylvas explained with a sigh. “Now we try to stay as nondescript as possible. However, my men know we have passed through the array,” Ylvas explained.

The tunnels weren’t endless like the ones far underground, and they soon reached a large cavern where ten cultivators stood armed and ready. However, the moment they saw Ylvas, they relaxed and quickly greeted them with a smile. The next moment, another fifty men appeared out of nowhere, startling both Zac and Billy.

“Alien-man’s friends are magic too,” Billy muttered with a subdued voice as he glared at the men with his club at the ready. “Or are they ghosts?”

“They are not ghosts, Billy; they simply hid with the help of arrays, like the one we passed,” Ylvas explained.

“How are you people able to utilize so many arrays?” Zac asked with surprise. “Did you know about arrays before the integration or something?”

“Array disks,” Ylvas explained. “We found a cache with these array disks early in the hunt and learned how to use them after some experimentation. No knowledge is needed to activate them. Unfortunately, we never found any strong ones. Perhaps it’s too hard to imprint arrays on disks.”

“I’d like to buy one of each of the disks you’ve found,” Zac quickly said.

Those things would both be convenient for himself when he traveled, and it would also be good to have a few of them to study.

“You can just take them. I have a small hill of the things,” Ylvas said and took out eight different disks. “Their effect is much weaker compared to the things you can buy from the Town Shops, and you need to supply them with Nexus Crystals. But they are not restricted by geography and are easy to use.”

Zac picked up one of the disks and looked at the extremely fine inscriptions on its surface. It seemed a pretty high skill in both inscription and arrays was needed to create these things. While Zac and Ylvas discussed the disks, most of the men who had been ready to ambush the intruders walked away, making the cave seem more like a campsite. Some were playing cards, while others were cultivating or resting.

Zac threw the disks into his Cosmos Sack and opened up his ladder to check up on the squad that he would work together with. The general strength of those present wasn’t bad, though there were only four people in the top 100, and all of them were pretty far down. Then again, these people had been hiding for a few days, meaning their actual strength might be higher than their positions indicated.

Most simply accepted Zac and Billy’s presence without question since they had been brought by Ylvas, but not everyone went back to their seats. Many eyes turned toward the two in curiosity. But the faces of the inquisitive ones quickly changed after a few seconds, likely when they noticed Zac’s ladder positions.

Greed was apparent on the faces of many of them, and some hands even moved toward their weapons as from instinct. Zac frowned at the reaction, but he wasn’t too surprised either. He didn’t say anything and silently observed what would happen.

As for Billy, he didn’t seem to understand the mood and was instead staring at a fire that had a huge spit of meat over it that looked just about done.

Soon it seemed some couldn't contain their greed any longer, and a large man sporting two swords on his back slowly walked over. Zac saw he had pretty decent ladder positions, holding the sixty-fourth spot on the Hunter Ladder. After slightly bowing toward Ylvas, he once again turned toward Zac.

"Leader, it's good that you are back. I see you've brought the walking treasure trove," he said before turning toward Zac. "That bastard emperor has almost gone mad looking for you. It must be burdensome to carry that much treasure by yourself. Why not share a bit with your new allies?"

"We have all been in the same hunt," Zac answered with a shrug. "The wealth we have gathered depends on our abilities."

"Is that right?" the man said with a grim smile. "I can't help but think of there being an element of luck as well. But luck can quickly turn to misfortune."

"Is that a threat?" Zac said with a deadpan face.

"I wouldn't dream of it, but wealth can be a curse," the man said with a sneer. "You never know when calamity strikes. But that's what having allies is for, no? Sharing the burden. We're stuck here together, after all."

"I think I'll be fine. And make no mistake – I'm not stuck here with you. You're stuck inside here with me," Zac said as his heavy aura ripe with dense killing intent rolled out from him and drowned the whole cave.

The arrogant man desperately backed away after being inundated by the killing intent, his face as pale as a sheet. It was the same with the other cultivators as they looked at Zac with a mix of shock and horror. Even Beruv Ylvas seemed slightly taken aback by the ruthless aura, and he thoughtfully looked at Zac from the side before he spoke up.

"Fools, do you think one would gain those ladder positions by luck? Now don't mess around; they are the important allies I've arduously found. They will be the key in ridding our planet of the Medhin scourge," Ylvas said with a glare at the man who had taunted Zac. "If anyone causes trouble for our new friends, you will be declared a traitor of Berum."

Zac simply nodded at Ylvas in thanks. However, he did note that the champion hadn't done anything to stop that man until Zac made a showing of his power. Perhaps Ylvas wanted to gauge his personality or power better. Zac suddenly noticed that Billy was looking at him with huge eyes and his mouth slightly open.

"Uh, what's wrong?" Zac asked.

“That line was very cool. Can Billy use it?” Billy entreated.

“Sure, no problem.” Zac nodded with a smile.

He smiled widely at Zac before he headed over toward the meat on the spit and snatched it. The man who had been preparing the meat glared at Billy, but after throwing a glance at Zac, he chose not to speak up and instead took out another slab of meat from his Cosmos Sack with a sigh.

Ylvas walked over to a corner of the cave, and the cultivators around quickly made ample space for him. As soon as he sat down, he ate a pill and closed his eyes. Zac initially wanted to follow him, but after seeing that the man needed to focus on recuperation, he went over to Billy and sat down. He looked over to the man who spun the new slab of meat, and the man nervously nodded back and introduced himself as Taran.

“Do you have any information about the situation in the Medhin camp?” Zac asked.

The man threw a glance at Ylvas before he started talking with a shrug.

“Most of their forces have started to return to their mountains. Nenothepe sent out over a hundred squads to the outer parts of the hunt a week ago, and they are returning to provide the spoils,” Taran explained. “We set up as many traps as we could to kill the scouts, but most made it back alive. They are hard to kill because of their War Arrays.”

Zac nodded as he took out a strip of dried meat from his sack, making Taran sigh in relief.

“Do you have any information about the class and skills of the emperor and his top men?” Zac followed up.

The man quickly nodded and took out an information crystal.

“This is the top-tier information crystal from the Omniscient Eye. It’s from before the hunt, but the information should be mostly correct,” he said as he handed it over to Zac.

Zac immediately recognized the name Omniscient Eye. The cultivators from Berum he’d met right at the start had mentioned him or her, though they had no idea about that person’s real identity. They only suspected the person to be someone from the Medhin planet who had defected when the integration took place.

This crystal held far more information than the brochure that those cultivators had, making Zac quite shocked. As far as he knew, there was no one on Earth able to create information crystals this elaborate yet, meaning this Omniscient Eye should be quite the genius.

The information on Nenotheop was quite extensive, though much of it was marked as speculation and most was about his history and life. However, it was known that the emperor's weapon of choice was his spear and that he had some sort of warrior class. Both strength and speed were marked as "Exceptional."

Only one skill was mentioned, and it was called [**Spearstorm**]. The emperor had used it when he had single-handedly massacred a whole army by himself. His spear had turned into a blur, punching holes in everyone close to him. No one within 100 meters had been safe, and the only survivors were those who fled fast enough.

Not much else was said about him since he had never been forced to use his full strength so far, at least not in public. As for Vasidas, it was only mentioned he was suspected to be a mage class, but he'd never fought in public. Finally, there were a lot of generals and captains described in the crystal, but after a brief scan, Zac knew they wouldn't pose a challenge for him.

Zac handed the crystal back to the man on the opposite side of the fire and started talking with Billy for a bit. He also considered going out to kill some beasts while Ylvas rested, but in the end, he decided against it. One extra day of grinding wouldn't make a big difference in the long run, and he didn't want to ruin the plans by being spotted.

Zac had already gained another level while he traveled here, bringing him to level 63. He even was even halfway to level 64, so if their operation was a success, he might gain another level before the hunt was over.

Instead, he rested and went over all his newly acquired power-ups. Resting also helped with his mind a bit. It had been hurting since he'd overextended himself down in the caverns, but the headache had finally abated. After a while, the familiar thunderous snores echoed from next to him, bringing Zac out of his reverie.

The sounds echoed through the caves, drawing angry glares from everyone. Zac could only helplessly shrug his shoulders. Before he was faced with a mutiny, Zac quickly took out one of the array disks he had just received and activated it by placing a few F-grade crystals in the sockets. He placed the disk in front of Billy, and the giant suddenly disappeared, making the cavern grow quiet again.

"Taran, how long until we start?" Zac asked.

"Between half a day and a full day, depending on Lord Ylvas. He needs

to be in top condition to fight that old monster,” Taran whispered back as he carefully checked a quiver of arrows.

Zac nodded and once again closed his eyes. Since he didn't have anything to prepare, he simply pondered on the Dao while resting, especially the two new ones he had gained. The hours quickly passed until it was finally time to start the assault. There were no rousing speeches or waving of weapons in the air. Ylvas simply stood up and looked over the fifty men in the cavern.

“It is time,” was all he said with a somber face as he started to walk toward the exit.

One by one, the Berum resistance fighters stood up and started to stream out behind Ylvas. Zac cracked his neck and stood up as well. He hadn't made any real improvements during the short meditation. He didn't know why, but it felt like the Dao had been far more elusive since he'd arrived at the Eastern Trigram Sect. It was much easier to ponder on the Dao back on Earth, and he couldn't wait to get back.

He walked through the illusion array surrounding Billy, who still contentedly snored away.

“It's time, Billy. Let's go save Thea,” Zac said after he managed to wake the giant.

Soon sixty-seven warriors walked through the forest with a singular goal in mind – to slay an emperor.

INSURRECTION

Thea looked at the hopeless situation in front of her with a frown, her hand frozen by indecision.

“It’s just a game, dear. No need for such consternation.” Her opponent smiled from the opposite side of the table as Thea reluctantly moved a piece.

She didn’t know what was more vexing, being stuck as an unwilling pawn in the machinations of the crown prince in front of her, or that she was miserably losing in a game of chess. Vasidas had found her board game after his father looted her Cosmos Sack, and had immediately been taken with the seemingly simple game.

Of course, the former predicament was far worse in reality. She had truly and utterly overestimated herself. After the mishap with Zac, she had kept her head down and looted summit after summit for two whole weeks. But no matter what she did, she had been unable to get ahead in the ladder, and unlooted mountains were becoming almost impossible to find.

Thea knew that without risking one’s life, one couldn’t hope to get ahead in this new cut-throat world, so she had enacted a daring plan. She would snatch the Cosmos Sack of one of the four E-grade powerhouses apart from the two Dominators.

She already knew that apart from Emperor Nenotheop, the others were in the earliest stages of the E-grade, far weaker than the monstrous insectoid who had almost claimed her life earlier. She believed that between planning and her specific skill set, she would be able to steal the pouch and escape without them being able to stop her.

If worse came to worst, she would simply activate her ultimate escape skill once again. Losing a few levels in exchange for the accumulated wealth

of one of the E-grade powerhouses was a worthy trade. The levels could be gained back within a month, but the wealth of a fallen sect could help her and her family for decades.

But she had been naïve. She had followed Vasidas for three days, using every skill and lesson she had learned to hide from him. It was all for one specific moment. When the prince entered a summit array, he completely froze due to the protective array, and Thea had exploded into action.

The rest was only a blur. The next moment Thea remembered was when she stood in front of the smiling prince, devoid of her trial token or an ounce of Cosmic Energy. It turned out he had been aware of her presence since the start and had only played along to see what her plan was.

“Come now, you have been brooding since we decided to work together,” Vasidas said with a smile as he poured Thea a cup of tea. “Have I not been an accommodating host?”

“You did not leave me much of a choice,” Thea muttered, though she had to admit what he said was true.

He had been a true gentleman in every sense of the word, but her instincts screamed of danger every time she saw his congenial smile. That was especially true since she knew she was a key piece in Vasidas’ master plan. She had learned a bit of it from their time together so far, and his ruthlessness truly made her blood run cold. He had even somehow manipulated Ylvas Berum into a desperate struggle where Vasidas’ own brother died.

And now he had orchestrated an even more desperate battle.

“Come now. I have no interest in the lives of you or Mr. Atwood, as I have explained. I don’t care about this little hunt at all, for that matter. It’s just some levels and a Limited Title. If it didn’t provide me with the opportunity to play my games, I wouldn’t have joined in,” Vasidas said as he gripped one of his bishops.

“The treasures aren’t bad compared to my home world, I guess. But it’s just useless baubles compared to what the Great Lord will provide for his personal disciple,” the prince continued. “And as long as you and Mr. Atwood play my game, we can be seen as allies rather than enemies. Checkmate.”

A shiver ran down Thea’s spine as she saw Vasidas pick up her king and crush it into dust with a vicious gleam in his eyes. She truly didn’t know whether she wished for Zac to come or stay far away from this summit.

Zac, Billy, and the first company were moving toward the group of mountains the Medhin Army occupied. The optimal plan would be to dismantle all four surrounding mountain defenses before hitting the main mountain in the middle. That way, they would avoid any risk of being pincered from behind. Unfortunately, they did not have the manpower for that, so they needed to adopt a riskier approach.

The current plan was to quickly destroy the western mountain with their whole army and then immediately hit the main peak. A part of their forces would impede any potential backup from the other three mountains surrounding the main mountain, but the main force would move as a spear straight toward the emperor. That way, their backs would at least be clear for a while, allowing them to focus only on the enemies in front of them.

But that didn't mean it would be an easy battle. All the remaining royals and the strongest soldiers were stationed there, and everyone present knew that just ascending the mountain might cost them their lives. But everyone here was a soldier intent on liberating their world, and their eyes were filled with determination.

Zac and Billy were in the middle of the squad, and they were hidden in large cloaks. Billy was even hunched over to somewhat hide his massive frame. It had taken some time for Zac and Ylvas, but they had finally managed to explain the plan so that Billy understood it.

Billy would be a wall-breaker of sorts. If the defending armies on the main peak erected a strong defense, he would do his best to destroy or at least weaken it. Zac's job was to weaken the enemy side as much as possible in ten seconds after saving Thea. After that, he had to join Ylvas in the battle against Nenotheop. A caveat was that if Vasidas joined his father, they would immediately flee.

With the help of communication crystals, all four of the forces arrived around the targeted mountain within a few minutes of each other. Zac couldn't see the leaders of the other three squads, but Ylvas had already told them that each was led by a powerhouse who was close to the bottleneck.

"You two stay here with the reserve force. We do not want you within eyesight of their scouts or spies. We have already ascertained that physical line of sight is needed to check someone's ladder position. Billy is okay since his ladder position is far lower than his actual strength. But try to stay out of

sight as much as possible,” Ylvas said to Zac.

Zac only nodded and indicated for Billy to stay with him.

“We are not going with Alien-man?” Billy asked with some confusion.

“There are some bad guys up there, but Thea is not on this mountain. We will rest for now. We are the special weapon, so we can’t let the bad guys know about us,” Zac explained as he looked at the forces streaming up the mountain.

It didn’t take long for the whole mountain to erupt in furious fighting. It was clear, however, that the defending forces couldn’t match the Berum onslaught. The battles were steadily moving toward the summit, and soon they took place on the top of the mountain, obscuring Zac’s vision.

A few thundering echoes erupted on the summit, and not long after, the sounds of battle subsided. Zac saw that a few hundred men started streaming down toward their position. From the energy contained in those echoes up at the top of the mountain, it seemed like the ancillary mountains were only manned by regular soldiers and a few stronger people to maintain order.

There was no rest when the warriors had descended the mountain, and they cut straight toward the main peak. A few people had died and even more were wounded, but they simply popped a healing pill and restored their energy with a Nexus Crystal as they moved.

Soon they arrived at the foot of the mountain that Nenotheop Medhin occupied, and two squads veered off to impede any enemy forces coming for backup. But the main army consisting of roughly two hundred cultivators pushed toward the summit as one.

Their force was led by Ylvas and his three generals. One was a young man with a slightly feminine face who held a staff in both his hands. The second was a huge woman who Zac almost thought was a smaller female version of Billy. She sported an enormous two-handed sword on her back, and her arms bulged with huge muscles. The final general looked positively ancient, but he had no problems keeping up with the others, and it almost looked like he floated.

They started ascending the mountain, but there surprisingly were no signs of any resistance, with not even a single squad of defenders stationed to impede their approach. In fact, it looked like all the structures and obscuring features of the mountain had been demolished, giving everyone a clear line of sight toward the summit.

Zac started to get a bad feeling as he slowly walked up the mountain

paths with the others, and he wasn't alone. Their progression had slowed to a crawl as the scouts in the front kept swiveling their heads back and forth in search of any traps waiting for them.

But it was instead a rumble that shook the whole mountain that warned them that the Medhin counterattack was incoming. Torrential amounts of flames were suddenly pouring down from the summit, making the mountain look like an erupting volcano.

However, Zac immediately sensed that the fire was conjured rather than a natural occurrence. Likely, it was some sort of slaughter array or combination attack from the Medhin soldiers. Still, the intensity of the incoming fire wasn't anything to scoff at, and Zac hesitantly glanced at Ylvas.

While Zac would be able to protect himself, and Billy if needed, from the onslaught, he wasn't so sure about the rest of the soldiers. But while Ylvas had a grim face, he didn't seem overly worried.

"Defend!" he shouted, and all the soldiers took out identical spheres and started to pump them full of Cosmic Energy as the ancient man took out a far larger copy of the same item.

The huge sphere floated up in the air above the old general, and the smaller orbs were clearly imbuing it with energy, making it quickly grow to cover their whole army. Only seconds later, the roiling flames slammed into the shield, but it held steady.

However, the force of the flames was clearly having an impact, and blood was streaming from the nose of the old man.

"We need to speed up. Lord Rhuvim can't keep the shield going for long!" Ylvas shouted and started to push forward.

The huge woman carefully lifted the old man and placed him on her shoulder as she ran, letting him fully focus on maintaining the barrier. But even though the army ran at a breakneck pace, the shield was quickly showing signs of collapse from the intense flames.

Worse yet, after a minute of ascending, they weren't only accosted by flames any longer. Huge boulders were tumbling down the mountain, each of them slamming into the mountain with enough force to make the ground shake.

Some of them luckily veered off course, but every time one of them hit the shield, it looked like the old man was physically punched. The onslaught was also having an effect on the army, and many faces were starting to pale from the energy consumption of maintaining the shield.

“I leave the rest to you, little Vas,” Rhuvim suddenly said with a wet cough that made blood stream down his robe.

The next moment, he flashed forward, ignoring Ylvas’ order to wait. His aura was completely unleashed, and a hurricane formed around him that soon was over fifty meters wide. Power roiled in the air around the old man, and he pushed straight into the flames.

Zac sighed because he understood what fueled that tremendous burst of power. That old general was burning his remaining life force in order to create an opening that would let the army ascend. The intense powers in the hurricane threw the incoming boulders far up into the air, harmlessly passing the speeding army by, and even the cascading flames were forced to retreat from his advance.

The general’s sacrifice was enough to allow the Berum resistance force to reach the summit unscathed. The moment they saw the crest, the old man simply looked back and smiled before he fell over. Ylvas immediately flashed over and caught the old man, cradling the body with red-rimmed eyes.

Zac mutely stared at the corpse of Rhuvim with a heavy heart. The old man might not have possessed even a fraction of the power compared to the old man in his Dao Vision, but he clearly shared the same type of conviction. Zac slightly bowed toward the man as Ylvas put him into his Cosmos Sack before he drew his rapier with a grim expression.

Waiting for them at the top were hundreds of elite soldiers emitting monstrous killing intent. In the front of the soldiers stood a man in a golden robe, holding a three-meter-long spear in his right hand. A towering aura was emanating from him, even making his hair flutter in the air.

“So you have come, rebel scum. It is just as well. You will join Reputat for his final journey.”

WALL-BREAKER

Zac looked at the emperor through a crack in the ranks of soldiers in front of him. The man was nothing like the Medhin princeling he'd killed on the first day. Tyrbat had relied on the empowerment of his War Array and his trinkets, but Nenotheop was completely different.

He gave off a similar aura as Greatest. Of course, not the same levels of power, but the air of someone who had fought countless battles. Zac had a feeling this would turn into another battle where his lack of experience would be holding him back. However, he didn't care much about Nenotheop himself; he was more worried about where Thea was being held.

"The girl is with me," a voice suddenly sounded in his head, making him look around with wide eyes. "You won't find me, Mr. Atwood. Thea Marshall will be safely released, but you must cooperate with my game. Kill Nenotheop and she will be set free. Try to find her, and I will immediately execute her."

Zac's heartbeat sped up as he tried to look anywhere for the source of the transmission. He didn't recognize the voice, but after putting two and two together, he had a strong suspicion it was Vasidas Medhin who spoke. He didn't know who else would be able to find him when it appeared not even the emperor had spotted him.

Zac looked around, but he couldn't see anything out of the ordinary. He also couldn't see Thea anywhere, meaning she likely was hidden away out of his reach.

He realized that his plan had been naïve. How would he free Thea in a situation like this? He didn't even know where she was. The most likely place would be within the protective arrays of the summit palace, but to get

there, he would have to cross the entire Medhin army. The question was whether he should go along with the voice or if he should ignore it and try to locate Thea while the others duked it out.

Unfortunately, the rest of the world didn't wait for him to decide on his course of action. A shocking aura started seeping out of Ylvas as he aimed his sword at the emperor. Zac's brows rose in surprise from the supreme aura he emitted. Honestly, Ylvas hadn't given him a large impression so far, but it was clear that he was the real deal. Unfortunately, it was also clear that while he was very strong for an early E-grade warrior, he was still not Nenotheop's match.

"Your dynasty ends today. Berum will never become the fuel for your insane Redeemer," Ylvas said, undeterred by the fact that his aura was getting somewhat suppressed by Nenotheop.

Soldiers shared confused glances in both camps due to Ylvas' proclamation, meaning that the Medhin soldiers were unaware of the truth of their imperial family. They would likely become fuel as well if their side won, yet they exhibited a great bloodlust as they glared at the resistance army, who, in a sense, tried to save their lives as well.

Of course, the forces of Berum would likely try to spread the news as widely as they could as soon as they got back, in hopes of fomenting insurrection within the Medhin population.

"Shields!" a general to the right of Nenotheop roared, and immediately, a huge silver shield covered the whole army that stood behind Nenotheop.

"Empyrean Guard!" a second general shouted, and within seconds, Nenotheop was covered in a golden glow.

The setup was similar to all the other squads that he had encountered. One part defended the foot soldiers, whereas another part empowered their champion. It made sense, since the foot soldiers would only become fodder if they tried to personally fight against people like Zac or Ylvas.

The dense aura of Nenotheop increased even further, and Zac felt that the emperor would have no problems contending with Inevitability in his current condition. However, Ylvas wasn't cowed by the aura and unhesitatingly pushed forward with enough force to cause huge cracks in the ground.

The power Ylvas emitted was far beyond anything he had shown during the past days, and it all seemed to be concentrated in the tip of his sword as he stabbed straight toward Nenotheop, who swung his spear to intercept the strike. A shocking collision made the whole mountain shake, and that initial

salvo was the start of the war. The huge general pushed forward with heavy steps and slammed her sword into the ground as she ran.

Somehow she managed to rip up a three-meter-tall boulder with her sword, and with shocking precision, launched it straight at Nenothep with a grunt as she kept running. The stone was imbued with some high-level Dao as well since it started burning and caused multiple explosions in the air as it approached its target.

However, Nenothep barely spared a glance at the incoming boulder, and with a lightning-quick stab of his spear, turned it into fine sand that exploded outward. Fire and gravel flew in all directions, but Nenothep was unfazed by the assault.

The attack might not have wounded the emperor, but at least it obscured his vision somewhat. Ylvas was ready and tried to use the fire as a distraction while he stabbed at Nenothep's guts with a sword shimmering with some unknown power.

At the same time, two roots pierced through the ground, aiming to stab the emperor in his back. It was the final general, and Zac only now noticed that his staff looked like a tree planted in the ground, likely spreading its roots all the way over to the battle between Ylvas and Nenothep.

Even the large general had caught up and tried to decapitate the emperor with a wide swing flying straight above Ylvas' head. But it was as though the emperor had ten hands; every attack was blocked by either his spear or a bracer. He even had time to slam a knee into Ylvas' face, throwing him back ten meters with a grunt. Worst off was the female general, who had a large gash in her side from a lightning-quick stab.

"Come all, you maggots!" Nenothep roared as his bloodlust soared to the skies, and he forcibly started to suppress the trio, who desperately tried to get past his defenses.

The generals weren't the only ones who had gone all out from the start, as large shields were erected above the ranged attackers while the melee warriors started a suicidal run toward the enemy ranks. There was no longer any time to hesitate, and Zac turned toward his huge ally.

"Billy, I can't find Thea," Zac whispered to the giant, who balefully glared at the other side. "We will have to beat up the bad guys first. Can you break that shield? It is very strong."

"Billy will give it his biggest thwunk." The giant nodded as he started running toward the shield along with the other melee fighters.

Zac followed suit, using Billy's enormous frame to hide out of sight from Nenotheop and his generals. The sky was starting to blot out with attacks soaring between the two camps, and there were already a few fatalities amongst the melee warriors who couldn't dodge or endure the onslaught.

The Medhin army was far better off since not one of them had stepped outside the protective cover of their shields, and they could leisurely pick off one approaching warrior after another with ranged attacks.

Zac tried to help as much as he could by rapidly throwing out dozens of daggers to intercept the more powerful attacks, to save at least a few lives in their approach. Billy was also getting ready as he took out his club halfway to the other side. Suddenly, his aura simply exploded, and he actually started to grow.

In just a second, he was over ten meters tall, holding an equally monstrous club. His skin glowed with a golden luster, and Zac was shocked to sense some ancient power emanating from his friend. It was as though Billy weren't human, but rather some ancient Titan as he took the last lumbering steps toward the shield.

Even the emperor couldn't help but look over at Billy's massive frame, and he frowned in consternation. He tried to move over to stop him, but Ylvas and his two generals desperately fought to keep him at bay.

"Intercept him," Nenotheop roared in anger, and tons of attacks flew toward Billy as he slowly lifted his club.

Billy clearly needed some time to accumulate enough power, since massive energies swirled around him as his muscles kept swelling. The attacks would arrive in a split second, and Zac didn't know whether Billy could survive such an onslaught even in his enormous form. Out of options, he hurriedly activated **[Nature's Barrier]** and imbued it with the Dao of Sanctuary, making a storm of leaves cover them both.

Luckily, Billy's enormous leg blocked any sight of Zac himself, making it look like it was Billy himself who had erected the defenses. Zac felt a huge amount of Cosmic Energy get expended as almost a hundred attacks slammed into his leaves, but at least it lessened the damage on Billy by about 80%.

Still, the defenses couldn't block everything, and many attacks slipped past the leaves and slammed into Billy. It was clear that his Endurance wasn't too high, as multiple wounds erupted all over his body, making a rain of golden blood pour down on Zac.

Zac was surprised by the color of the blood since a transformation skill

shouldn't change his blood like that. It was also clear that while Billy had been wounded, he wouldn't be deterred from completing his task. A ruthless aura emitted from him as Billy ran forward the final steps until he stood right in front of the shield.

“BILLY IS NOT STUCK WITH YOU! YOU'RE STUCK INSIDE BILLY,” the giant suddenly roared with enough volume to be heard across half the hunt, and he swung down the club.

An otherworldly pressure was released from the club, and Zac felt the force was easily stronger than when he used his **[Nature's Punishment]** along with the Dao of Heaviness. It contained a titanic strength as it sailed down toward the shield. Its might even forced some soldiers down on their knees before it had even landed.

“No!” Nenotheop roared in anger as he lit up in blazing power.

The next moment, it was as though Nenotheop's spear turned into a laser as it elongated and aimed straight toward Billy's heart in an attempt to instantly kill him. Zac's eyes widened in alarm as he immediately jumped up and changed the Dao infusion to the Dao of Trees in his defensive skill.

There was no way that Billy would be able to dodge in his cumbersome form, and he definitely did not possess enough defense to withstand it. The swirling leaves lit up in emerald luster as they formed a tighter screen in front of him as Zac rose over six meters in the air to intercept the strike.

With a growl, Zac also swung **[Verun's Bite]** with all his might to stop the attack. However, the attack far surpassed what he had expected. It looked like the emperor wasn't holding back when he tried to kill Billy.

It felt like he had been hit by a truck when Zac's axe collided with the incoming fractal spear. Luckily, he barely managed to change the trajectory, and the attack gored a large wound in Billy's shoulder instead of piercing his heart. The attack went straight through Billy's body, continuing for hundreds of meters.

Zac wasn't much better off as the collision slammed him into the ground with enough force to crack a rib and push the air out of his lungs. Worse yet, he had clearly been exposed since he sensed multiple stares at him as he tried to orient himself.

“It's you!” Nenotheop exclaimed with widened eyes as he stared straight at Zac.

Billy wailed in pain from the attack, but thanks to Zac, he managed to keep his attack going as it swung down at the shield with world-ending force.

A huge shockwave rippled outward as the shield cracked, causing widespread damage to the cultivators who maintained it. Some of the weaker soldiers even exploded from the force, causing multiple fountains of gore to erupt around the Medhin soldiers.

Ylvas also managed to seize the opportunity while the emperor's attention was on Billy and Zac, and managed to stab his sword deep into Nenotheop's gut. Nenotheop growled in anger and was forced to refocus his efforts at the trio who assaulted him with newfound vigor, ignoring their mounting wounds.

Zac's ears were ringing, but he knew he couldn't slack off, so he ignored the pain and forced himself to his feet. The defensive shield had a few large cracks from Billy's strike, but it was rapidly repairing itself. Zac didn't hesitate as he activated **[Loamwalker]** to flash inside the array.

A few cultivators tried to stop his approach, but a dozen people were instantly bisected by a huge fractal edge tearing straight through them. Zac looked back and saw a pale Billy, who was rapidly shrinking.

"Billy, good job! Return to the back lines and heal up," Zac shouted.

Billy nodded and started lugging back with slightly unsteady steps, avoiding errant attacks as best he could. Many of the melee warriors even chose to use their own bodies to protect his retreat, since Billy was clearly one of their aces. Billy's part in this assault was over, and he had delivered far beyond what Zac could have expected.

The force behind that swing was just insane. Five enormous fractal edges appeared at the edge of Zac's axe, and Zac's aura was finally completely unleashed as he looked at the soldiers, who instinctually stepped back from the billowing killing intent that he emitted.

Billy had held up his part of the bargain, and now it was time for him to uphold his.

CATASTROPHIC LOSSES

Zac sighed in relief when he saw that Billy was out of harm's way. Billy's attack was extremely impressive coming from someone in the F-grade, but there were also clear drawbacks to it. He was mostly defenseless as he ran toward the shield, and if Zac hadn't protected him with all his might, the giant would have died before even getting his attack to land. It also seemed to consume all of Billy's energy since he was completely spent after just one swing.

And while the attack was extremely strong, it wasn't very quick. Both Zac and Ogras would have no problem avoiding it with their movement skills. But it was a perfect attack to destroy an immobile object, and Zac couldn't imagine the power Billy would be able to exhibit when he reached E-grade. He only needed a good team who would be able to help him bring his monstrous strength to bear.

There was also the issue of his transformation and golden blood. Did Billy possess a bloodline, or had he attained a special constitution somehow? He had never heard of a skill changing the color of one's blood, and the change in Billy's appearance along with that immense aura seemed to be something greater than a skill.

But now was not the time to go over such things.

Waves of power radiated from Zac as he completely unleashed his aura. The five enormous fractal edges gained a silver sheen, having been infused with the Dao of Sharpness. But before he unleashed his carnage, Zac threw a gaze at Nenotheop, just in case he was preparing another of those monstrous long-ranged attacks.

The emperor looked completely enraged from the turns in the battle and

was relentlessly attacking the Berum trio. He almost looked like a god of war from the huge aura he emitted, and a large fractal shone in the air behind him. It seemed to be one of his skills rather than an effect of the War Arrays, and it provided the emperor with an odd but deadly effect.

Right when Zac glanced over, the emperor stabbed at Ylvas, but the fractal behind him flared, and it suddenly was as though two realities were superimposed. Somehow the emperor was also attacking the large woman at the same time, with the same weapon, breaking the laws of physics.

It was obviously not an even fight, just like Ylvas had feared. Nenotheop was perhaps even more powerful than they had anticipated. In the short moment that Zac had used to get inside the shield, the large woman had lost her left arm, and the mage was on his knees with blood freely flowing from his side.

Even Ylvas was barely holding on, and wounds kept appearing on him as he desperately tried to maintain the status quo until Zac could kill those who empowered Nenotheop. Zac knew that time was running out, and that they might not even last fifteen more seconds. The next moment, the ground beneath Zac exploded as he pushed toward the hesitant army.

He instantly moved to the thick of it with **[Loamwalker]**, knowing he had to cause as much damage as possible before Nenotheop could intervene. He also didn't want to stay in one spot, in case Nenotheop chose to discard the lives of his soldiers to attack him while he was inside the mob.

Zac's arm was a blur as the fractal edges shot in five directions. Four of them were completely unimpeded, causing widespread death in the blink of an eye. Blood formed huge pools as bisected corpses fell by the wayside, but Zac knew he had barely made a dent in the emperor's combat power.

The soldiers who had died were not part of the personal guard, but rather random elite soldiers who helped bolster the shields and the War Array. The fifth attack had been launched toward the two generals who stood behind Nenotheop, but before it could reach them and the personal guard, another shield sprang up, covering them inside.

A frown formed on Zac's face as he rushed toward them, shooting off two more edges in their direction as he ran. The soldiers inside the second shield were clearly the personal guard, the targets he had to eliminate. The protection wobbled and flickered from the two massive attacks, but it held true. But Zac noted that the soldiers maintaining the shield had paled, and a few were even bleeding from their eyes and ears.

Zac chose the simplest means to try to break it, and he slammed into it with the force of a speeding train, his body imbued with the Dao of Heaviness. Multiple cracks appeared in the barrier, and Zac didn't relent as he swung at the cracks with brutal fervor, each strike containing enough power to kill an E-grade beast.

It took two seconds of frenzied attacks, but he broke through and squeezed himself inside like a fox in the henhouse. A few of the surviving elite soldiers had tried to impede his progress, but Zac's attacks had made the outer shield completely break. The melee fighters from the Berum resistance had joined the battle by now, desperately fighting the remaining soldiers to stop them from adding their powers to new shields or the War Array.

Fear and hatred shone in the soldiers' eyes as Zac got inside the inner shield, leaving him standing just ten meters away from the personal guard. His aura was completely unleashed, and it actually managed to somewhat destabilize the War Array that was still maintained. No one wanted to be the first to attack him since they had all seen what he had done with over a hundred soldiers outside the inner shield.

The status quo only lasted for a second before Zac rushed forward, his axe already growing another fractal edge. The personal guards did everything in their power to keep him away, shooting a wide array of attacks right at him. The salvo consisted mainly of magical attacks, and over ten fireballs slammed right into his body. But Zac only roared and ignored the pain, confident that his enormous Endurance would pull him through.

However, in the next moment, he sensed some danger, and he swung out his axe toward the left instead of at the soldiers by sheer instinct. A glowing gauntlet appeared almost as though out of nowhere, and the two collided with enough force that the closest soldiers were thrown away. Some even sported wounds from the shockwave as they quickly got back on their feet.

A piercing pain erupted in Zac's side as a dagger was firmly lodged inside, and it felt like the wound was both frozen and burned at the same time. It was the two generals who had personally moved to stop him, and both were right at the E-grade bottleneck, judging by their power.

Zac glared at the soldiers who kept imbuing the emperor with power while keeping an eye on him, and he growled in frustration as he turned his attention to the two generals. He tried to grab the dagger-wielding one, but he slunk out of his grasp like an eel, quickly moving out of reach.

The other one also distanced himself as quickly as he could, but that

strategy did not come without downsides. They knew they couldn't compete head-on with him, but if they moved away, they also exposed their subordinates.

A fractal edge almost instantly grew to over fifteen meters, and it skewered almost as many soldiers without Zac even moving the axe. There were less than a hundred members of the personal guard, so a good chunk of them instantly died from that sneak attack.

There was no way to maintain a fractal edge that long, and it disintegrated after Zac managed to kill just a few more of them. But it did cause some chaos in the ranks, making the soldiers unsure whether they should empower their emperor or defend themselves.

Zac wouldn't relent as he pushed forward, but an enormous fist appeared above him, slamming straight down. Not only that, but it also formed an invisible restriction on him in an effort to stop his movement. The fist contained some sort of restrictive Dao, making the attack resemble **[Nature's Punishment]** a bit.

A roar escaped from Zac's throat as he swung his axe up to intercept the incoming strike, but as he did, he felt another of the stinging wounds erupt in his upper back. If he didn't have his high Luck to warn him, his heart would have been pierced, but he managed to tilt mid-swing enough so that the wound was mostly superficial.

An idea suddenly appeared in Zac's mind, and he stopped his swing mid-motion. Next, he instantly released his Dao Field of Heaviness, making the assassin slightly stumble when he tried to move away. Zac took advantage of that brief window and grabbed him, instantly sealing his fate.

A crunching sound echoed out, and the next moment, the enormous fist slammed into Zac, causing the whole mountain to shake. A second later, the fist disintegrated, showing a large crater five meters deep. At the bottom was a mangled piece of flesh, crushed beyond recognition.

Next to it was Zac's bloody form, though in far better shape. Zac got up to his feet with a groan and used **[Loamwalker]** to push out of the pit. He had bet he would be able to endure the attack with his defensive layers, and he had been correct. The next moment, he was once again amongst soldiers, and the carnage resumed.

The general who was still alive desperately tried to impede him, but he had just spent a huge amount of energy on his final strike, and he no longer had his teammate to share the burden. Zac was like an enraged boar as he

swung wildly, and the general only barely survived due to a dozen of the personal guards switching their attention to protect their leader instead of the emperor, who was clearly in control of his battle.

But even with the help of the personal guard, the general only managed to delay Zac in his goal to kill those who empowered Nenotheop. Zac knew that delay might be the difference between winning and losing the war. Over ten seconds had already passed since he'd entered the shield, and he knew that he was almost out of time.

Energies blazed around him as Zac completely ignored his energy expenditure, aiming to completely and utterly destroy the remaining general. His large gauntlets were already bloody scrap metal from Zac's assault, and he was barely staying on his feet as it was. But his eyes burned with conviction as he glared at Zac.

"Empyrean Sacrifice!" he roared with a hoarse voice, and Zac's senses almost immediately sensed danger.

He tried to move backward, but suddenly, it was as though he were stuck inside tar. The remaining sixty soldiers in the personal guard still in fighting condition all had their focus on Zac by now, and they seemed to be cooperating on some array with somber expressions.

An enormous ball of chaotic energies was quickly growing right between himself and the soldiers, and Zac knew he had to get away. Zac's danger sense only got more and more urgent, and Zac desperately fought to move through the restriction that had been placed on him. His muscles strained as he finally managed to force himself free from the suppression.

But before he had a chance to activate [**Loamwalker**], the huge ball of energy exploded, turning the whole world white.

Zac barely had time to activate [**Nature's Barrier**] imbued with the Dao of Trees, followed up by imbuing himself with the Dao of Hardness. He even activated a defensive option of his golden robe to cover him. But even with all that, it felt like he was blasted into pieces when the explosion hit him, and he was thrown away like a ragdoll.

His mind was drifting away as he flew, but Zac barely managed to refocus his mind. As soon as he landed, he immediately got himself ready to once again assault the soldiers, ignoring the pathetic state of his body. But the moment he saw the personal guard, he knew there would be no need for that.

Almost nothing remained of the whole area where the personal guard once stood, apart from a crater and a few burned remains of body parts. One

of the few corpses that wasn't completely obliterated sported two mangled gauntlets, indicating that not even the last general had survived the final blast.

Empyrean Sacrifice seemed to have been the final attack of the personal guard, sacrificing their lives to take Nenotheop's enemies with them to the grave. And as he looked down at his burned body covered in wounds, he knew that perhaps only himself and the two Dominators would be able to survive a blast of that magnitude. He wasn't even sure he would have survived unless he had just gained a huge amount of Endurance down in the caverns.

The personal guard hadn't been the only ones affected by the explosion, though. A large number of soldiers from both camps had been too close to the battle and became casualties as well. Even those who had maintained a healthy distance weren't spared as their bodies were crushed by the shockwave. It was clear that both sides had sustained catastrophic losses.

His body hurt, but at least his first task was done, and the whole personal guard was eradicated. Zac victoriously looked over at the main battle, but his brows rose in alarm when he saw the scene. The situation was even worse than he'd feared. The large woman was lying dead on the ground, and the mage was barely alive from the look of him.

Even Ylvas was in dire straits, drenched in blood and missing a leg. He somehow stood upright with the help of Cosmic Energy, but his aura was chaotic. If Nenotheop hadn't received a backlash from his War Array getting ripped to pieces, he might have already killed the Berum champion.

The fight was about to be wrapped up, and Zac didn't even dare to waste a single breath. Torrential amounts of energy gathered in his forearm while he launched a fractal edge at the emperor to buy some time. It was as though Nenotheop had eyes in the back of his head, and he immediately swung his spear in a wide arc. The swing disintegrated the fractal edge, even though it was imbued with the Dao of Sharpness.

"You actually survived the Empyrean Sacrifice. You truly are a human cockroach. But I do not need a War Array to handle the two of you," Nenotheop sneered at the approaching Zac.

Zac didn't bother with an answer, but the space above him suddenly cracked, and a huge wooden hand emerged.

SPEAR WORLD

Zac came out of the gates swinging, knowing that Ylvas wouldn't last much longer. He needed to finish this as quickly as possible before they completely ran out of energy because there was still the issue of Vasidas and the missing Thea.

Energy ripped around Zac as he pushed forward, activating **[Hatchetman's Rage]** in order to boost the wooden hand to the absolute limit of what he could unleash. Both the hand of **[Nature's Punishment]** and himself were rapidly approaching Nenotheop until Zac finally stopped fifty meters away while the hand kept moving.

Nenotheop's aura had noticeably weakened due to losing the effect of the War Array, but he still emitted a tremendous fighting spirit. It didn't look like he had expended much energy to whittle down Ylvas and his generals, meaning Zac would essentially be fighting him at full capacity.

The large fractal that hovered behind the emperor moved to intercept the giant hand, stopping ten meters away from Nenotheop like a shield. Surprisingly, the emperor started to launch a frenzy of stabs at the fractal, his arm and spear turning into a blur.

Zac's brows rose in alarm when he saw that the fractal both multiplied and empowered the strikes, resulting in hundreds of spear silhouettes stabbing into the approaching hand. It felt as though his whole arm was getting eviscerated by the relentless attacks, and wood chips were raining down on the ground as each spear fractal ripped away piece after piece.

A sudden burst of energy made the emperor stop in his tracks, and he quickly turned in alarm when two fractal snakes ripped toward him from behind. They weren't very large, reaching only a few meters in length, but

they emitted terrifying energy. Both were pitch black, and it appeared like they had small horns in their foreheads.

They flew toward Nenotheop in a swirling circular manner, forming almost what looked like a spring as they approached. An azure fractal sword traveled in the empty space within the spring the two snakes formed, and it was as though the snakes guarded the real attack on its way toward its target. The attack originated from Ylvas, who had paled and fallen on his hands and knees after the attack.

The emperor growled in frustration as he ripped an amulet from his chest and threw it at **[Nature's Punishment]** before he focused his attention on the incoming snake strike. Clearly, he considered an attack from an actual E-grade warrior a higher threat than that of Zac, who was only level 63. Even the fractal swapped position to instead be pointed toward Ylvas.

A torrent of spears shimmering with lethality moved to intercept Ylvas' strike, but the two snakes that protected the sword strike suddenly opened their mouths, and the space in front of them started to distort. It was as though they had small black holes in their mouths, and they caused a huge suction of the area in front of them, dragging everything inside.

Everything in the vicinity was sucked into the maws of the snakes, and even the spear fractals from the emperor were simply swallowed up by the two snakes as they flew closer. But there was a limit to how many attacks they could gobble up since they got more and more engorged as they kept diverting the incoming attacks.

Finally, one of the snakes couldn't take any more, and it flashed ahead of the other one and appeared almost right in front of Nenotheop, who swung his spear to destroy the incoming threat. But the moment the spear touched the beast, it exploded like a bomb, instantly releasing dozens of spear strikes in every direction.

Ylvas had turned the emperor's unceasing attacks against him as the snake spat out everything it had eaten at the last second with almost as much force as the attacks initially had. The emperor's fractal once again flashed, and Nenotheop almost turned into a six-armed asura as he deflected attack after attack with impossible speed.

But he didn't even have time to destroy half of the attacks before the second snake flashed over, and this one exploded by itself even without being attacked. It released another barrage of attacks at him, joining the remaining strikes in an effort to rip the emperor to shreds. Nenotheop was barely visible

within the sea of spear strikes, but an almost blindingly strong golden glow erupted around him.

It looked as though a bomb exploded, erupting outward from the emperor and disintegrating all the fractal strikes around him in an instant. The assault wasn't over, however, as the final blade strike that had been hidden within the two snakes flashed forward, stabbing straight through the golden glow and flying toward Nenothep's heart.

Unfortunately, the emperor managed to move his spear in time, hitting the azure sword strike, though he only managed to swing it downward without much force. He hadn't been able to gather enough energy or momentum for the defense since he had been occupied by the surprise attacks from the two snakes. Nenothep did what he could, but he wasn't able to completely destroy the fractal that likely even consisted of Ylvas' life force.

The fractal sword tore into his side, causing blood to cascade down his golden robes, and it was the first real wound that Nenothep had received during the whole battle. But Nenothep had no time to react before a huge crash erupted from behind him.

Ylvas' attack had taken less than a second, and during that time, the defensive amulet had tried to stave off **[Nature's Punishment]**. But some defensive tool had no way to stop the onslaught of Zac's ultimate attack. Everything he had was loaded into that strike, and it was even empowered by **[Hatchetman's Rage]**.

The hand had undergone a rebirth after Nenothep was forced to stop attacking since it was imbued by the Dao of Trees with its concept of life from death. If one wanted to stop the hand, they would need to completely destroy it, or it would just grow back.

The defensive amulet was a high-quality item, but it was no match for the compounding power of Zac's strongest attack, and its shield fractured and broke after just a split second with a huge explosion. The hand continued unencumbered straight toward Nenothep, who had just been stabbed by Ylvas.

Zac didn't hesitate and immediately slammed down his hand with as much force as he could muster. **[Nature's Punishment]** fell like a slap from the gods at Nenothep, who roared in anger. Blazing energies swirled around him as he actually threw his spear straight up at the incoming hand.

A tremendous shockwave blasted outward when the spear slammed into the hand, and an enormous crack in the mountain formed right beneath that

spanned the whole summit. Zac screamed in pain as a hole was ripped open in his hand when the power in the spear managed to do the same to **[Nature's Punishment]**.

Pushing down the pain, Zac arduously formed a fist with his broken hand and finally managed to slam it down on Nenotheop. Another tremendous shockwave erupted when a crater over ten meters deep formed. The fist was on a completely other level compared to the attack that Nenotheop's general had generated earlier, and even the Star Ox would have been turned into meat paste from the attack.

However, a badly wounded but very much living Nenotheop got back to his feet at the bottom of the crater with a growl, making Zac sigh in regret. E-grade warriors were a pain in the ass to kill. The next moment, another wave of shocking energies gathered around Nenotheop, and he rose into the air like a D-grade powerhouse.

"Are you still going to hide, unfilial child?!" he shouted, and suddenly, his fractal reappeared after having been destroyed by **[Nature's Punishment]**. "Spear World!"

The fractal started growing, and in an instant, it spanned hundreds of meters in the air above them. Most of the summit was covered, and Zac immediately got a bad feeling when he sensed the immense power that the fractal radiated. Zac was confused at first, but he soon understood the meaning of Nenotheop's words.

Vasidas was not only a restraining force upon Zac, but perhaps even more so on Nenotheop himself. He was afraid of expending too much energy, making himself vulnerable to a coup by his own son. But it was clear Nenotheop was no longer holding back, judging by the monstrous energies that he was burning up.

Zac wanted to jump toward him before Nenotheop unleashed whatever he had planned, but a sense of impending crisis immediately made him swing his axe toward his back. To his surprise, a fractal spear had stabbed at him from nowhere, and Zac barely managed to destroy it due to his honed instincts.

Zac quickly glanced around and saw that no matter where he looked, people were assaulted by innumerable spear attacks, making it seem like they were all caught in a hurricane made of fractal spears. Not even the remaining forces of Medhin were spared, and they desperately wailed before being struck down by their own leader.

It was as though the spears were blind while they tried to cause utter annihilation. Even the palace in the distance started to collapse as spears kept slamming into it as well. This type of attack must be the emperor's strongest attack, which he had held off on using. It must cost an insane amount of Cosmic Energy, judging by the widespread damage, and it also seemed not to care about friend or foe.

Zac's thoughts immediately went to Thea, and he desperately started running toward the emperor as he deflected the strikes he could stop and endured those he couldn't with his body or **[Nature's Barrier]**. Wounds were racking up at an alarming rate, and he knew he wouldn't last too long even with his Endurance and defensive measures. Ylvas was even worse off, as he was completely spent from his earlier fight and the ultimate attack.

Even the final general had fallen, it seemed. He had erected a wooden barrier around himself, but the consecutive attacks had quickly whittled it down and killed the man inside. And if someone of that power fell in just a few seconds, there was no need to guess how the weaker people on the summit were faring.

"Flee from the summit!" Ylvas desperately shouted as he fended off spears coming from every direction while hobbling toward Nenotheop as well.

But it was to no avail. The normal resistance fighters couldn't even stop the spears from wounding them, let alone block them while they made their way off the mountains. People were falling one by one across the whole summit, and in just a few seconds, less than 10% remained. Those who were spared were mainly the lucky ones who were at the edge of the fractal in the sky since they managed to get out quickly enough.

The emperor kept hovering in the air with his spear pointed up toward the fractal in the sky, and Zac started shooting fractal edges of his own at him as he ran. However, they were whittled down by the innumerable spears in the area and didn't even reach halfway before being destroyed.

Zac growled as he activated **[Loamwalker]** and sped toward the emperor at maximum speed. The next moment, he pushed himself off the ground toward him and launched a series of fractal edges in a split second. The first two held a dark metallic luster, and they were imbued with the Dao of Hardness.

The two strikes managed to withstand the innumerable fractal spears as they paved the way toward the emperor, and the following three strikes were imbued with the Dao of Sharpness. The emperor wasn't defenseless,

however, as tens of spears suddenly appeared below him as they ripped the first three fractal edges to shreds in an instant and descended toward Zac.

Then a shadow suddenly appeared in front of him as a blast of energies erupted, destroying all of the spears between Zac and Nenotheop. It was Ylvas, who had expended even more life force to destroy the final defense.

“Go!” Ylvas coughed as he started falling toward the ground, stretching out his entwined hands.

Zac gritted his teeth as he used Ylvas’ hands as a plateau, and Ylvas launched him up toward the emperor with all the force he could muster before slamming into the ground like a meteor. The emperor, finally forced to redirect his spear from pointing at the fractal, stabbed it straight toward Zac’s heart.

Zac knew he only had one shot at this, so he completely removed any defensive measures as he slightly tilted his body, letting the spear pierce straight through his body. However, it just missed his heart, and with Zac’s momentum, he was within arm’s reach of the emperor in an instant.

Nenotheop tried to rip out his spear, but it was completely stuck since Zac had imbued himself with the Dao of Hardness while he swung his axe as quick as lightning. Out of options, Nenotheop finally released the grip of his spear to push himself backward, but at the last second, a small fractal edge grew out from **[Verun’s Bite]**.

Three thumps were soon heard as Zac, Nenotheop, and Nenotheop’s head fell onto the ground, and Zac was immediately infused with a huge amount of Cosmic Energy. It was far beyond anything he had ever gained before, and he knew that he hadn’t just received one level from the kill.

The emperor had been too reliant on his weapon and had tried to hold on to it until the end. It was likely that no one had ever managed to disarm him since he had stood at the peak his whole life. It allowed Zac a brief window to catch the old warrior off guard when he refused to let go, and Zac had decapitated him in one swift swing. Between the E-grade edge of **[Verun’s Bite]** and the Dao of Sharpness, even an old monster couldn’t keep his head after such an attack.

Zac let his axe feed on the blood of the headless emperor, and Verun screamed in exultation in his mind. Afterward, he slowly dragged out the emperor’s spear, a groan escaping his lips. Blood flowed like a river from the wound, but the bleeding quickly slowed down as he ate one of his best healing pills.

After that, he hastened over to Ylvas' side. His own state was pretty pathetic, but the champion of Berum was truly on his last legs. Zac quickly got down on his knee and fed him one of his top-grade healing pills while quickly creating a tourniquet for his missing leg.

"We did it!" Ylvas weakly said, his eyes filling with tears of relief. "That old monster is gone."

Zac nodded with a smile, but just as Zac started to relax, his mind screamed he was in danger.

MAN'S BEST FRIEND

Warning bells were going off in Zac's mind, and he quickly slammed his axe into the ground right next to the stump of Ylvas' leg. **[Verun's Bite]** sucked in a bit more E-grade blood from the pool that had formed beneath it, making the fractal on the handle blaze crimson red, allowing Zac to unleash his final trump card. He squeezed some of his remaining Cosmic Energy into his axe, and the enormous form of Verun appeared.

The Tool Spirit was able to localize the threat as if by instinct, and it immediately pounced to the left and swiped its large claws seemingly into the air. A groan could be heard as a young man appeared out of nowhere, sinister energies swirling around his hands. It almost looked like stars were hovering around them, and the skill reminded Zac of Abby's large eye.

A large gash stretched across the man's whole upper body from Verun's surprise attack. He barely had time to land before the enormous beast bit at him with almost impossible speed. The primordial beast ruthlessly swung his head back and forth in an effort to rip his prey to shreds; blood cascaded all over the area. Unfortunately, Zac sensed no incoming Cosmic Energy, indicating that the man was still alive.

The assassin had been taken by surprise by the sudden appearance, but he managed to avoid any fatal injuries even when he was in the maw of the Tool Spirit. A purple light suddenly shone through the teeth of Verun, and it grew in intensity until it was almost blinding in just a second.

The next moment, the light quickly disappeared before a huge explosion took place inside Verun's maw. The Tool Spirit's semi-corporeal form was completely obliterated, and Zac was forced a few steps back from the intense energies from the explosion.

Worry filled his heart when he saw Verun's shape fall apart, but he soon breathed out in relief as he sensed the spirit returning to the axe, while the red fractal dimmed down. It only sent him a sense of frustration that it had failed, and that it needed to rest again.

The assassin had managed to stave off Verun, but he was in a pitiful state. Grisly wounds covered his whole body, especially around his stomach, where Verun had chomped down with its massive teeth. Zac could see his innards and a few bones through the huge wounds, and he was surprised the assassin could even stand up from how he looked.

However, Zac wasn't completely relieved, even though his body was in disrepair. The man's aura was completely unstable as it fluctuated around him, but the energy the guy emitted was no joke. His eyes were also sharp as he glared at Zac, indicating he hadn't completely lost his fighting strength. Judging by the energy fluctuations and clothes of the man in front of them, Zac knew this could only be one person.

"Vasidas," Ylvas growled as he aimed his sword at him, arduously getting back on his leg.

However, Zac knew that it was just empty bluster. The old champion's body was completely wrung out from his last attacks, and he was only conscious by sheer willpower. If he squeezed out any more life force to attack, he would either turn into a cripple or die.

The situation was the worst-case scenario. He'd known there was a decent risk of Vasidas doing this, and it was one of the reasons he had tried to end the fight as quickly as possible. He had also entered the weakened state since the boost from **[Hatchetman's Rage]** had run out.

But he knew he couldn't show weakness at this juncture, and resolutely gripped his axe while his other hand moved toward his Cosmos Sack. He didn't have some secret weapon there, but his mind went to the Spiritual Pill he'd found on the alchemist's mountain.

Just a whiff from the vapors accumulated in the cauldron had not only restored his energy and given him a level, it had also revived him out of his weakened state. He wasn't sure what would happen if he ingested the pill in his current situation, but he didn't really have many other alternatives if the man in front of him tried something.

"Well played. I did not see that coming. Owning a weapon with a spiritual form, impressive," the man panted before looking down at his wretched appearance. "I guess today's game is over. But I have a feeling we

will see each other again.”

“Where’s Thea?” Zac said with a frown while he held his axe at the ready.

It sounded like Vasidas would give up since his sneak attack had failed, but Zac wouldn’t take his word for it.

“Ms. Marshall is having tea over in the gazebo on the other side of the summit,” Vasidas said. “I always uphold my promises.

“Today is my loss, but the Great Redeemer’s machinations are unavoidable.” The voice of Vasidas echoed across the summit, drawing glares from the Berum forces, who stood in the distance.

Zac hesitated for a second, but in the end, he chose not to force a battle or try a sneak attack. Killing this man wasn’t his main goal, and it had a high risk of backfiring. Zac knew he had made the right decision when Vasidas just slowly faded into nothingness, both his aura and body suddenly gone.

“I don’t believe that,” Ylvas said with a sigh, plopping down on the ground. “Fate is ever-changing.”

“Are you okay by yourself?” Zac asked, eager to head in the direction that Vasidas had indicated.

“Go, find your lass. My men will keep me safe,” Ylvas said as he popped another healing pill.

The moment that Vasidas left, the few remaining Medhin warriors heedlessly fled down the mountain, abandoning any thought of resistance. Of the Berum warriors, only a handful remained as well, most having died from the emperor’s final attack.

Everyone sported heavy wounds, but they formed a three-layer-thick shield wall around Ylvas, allowing their leader to heal up. Zac wasn’t sure they would really amount to much if Vasidas came back, but he needed to get going and didn’t say anything. As Zac left Ylvas’ side, the soldiers all also wordlessly bowed in his direction, showing their thanks for his part in the war.

“Do you know if Billy is okay?” Zac asked one of the guards surrounding Ylvas before he left.

“The large one? He fell asleep some ways down the mountain; a few people are guarding him,” the man said. “That smash was amazing.”

Zac nodded in relief before he started running over toward the ruins of the summit palace. He was about to enter it, but he stopped himself at the last moment to pop one of his top-grade healing pills in his mouth. He also took

out both a Divine Crystal and an E-grade Nexus Crystal to both heal and restore himself as quickly as possible.

He was extremely wrung out, and if he wasn't careful, he'd turn into his Draugr form again, which might lead to untold problems. He also was in no condition to assault a summit array. The frenzied strikes of the emperor's Spear World had turned the palace into ruins, but Zac didn't dare bet his life that it had also destroyed the protective arrays surrounding it.

It was only twenty minutes later he felt strong enough to go ahead. During that time, there hadn't been any real changes on the summit. The squads who had veered to the sides to intercept any potential backup had rushed up the mountain after hearing the results of the battle, and they had taken over the task of protecting Ylvas.

A few even stood vigil over Zac while he recuperated, though it wasn't really necessary. While he was spent, it was not to the same degree as when he'd fought Salvation. The emperor had been far stronger, but Zac had gained a huge upgrade in both survivability and Cosmic Energy reserves due to his frantic leveling while in his Draugr form.

He was still far from top shape as he got back to his feet, but Zac felt it should be enough to not get blasted by the array. He took a few steps forward and was immediately inundated in scorching flames. With his high constitution, however, it only stung a bit, and he made his way through in just a few seconds.

Soon enough, he found the place Vasidas referred to, hidden beyond the rubble at the far end of the palace, overlooking the mountain. Standing there was a small gazebo that was undamaged by Nenotheop's crazed onslaught, likely saved by the fact that it was out of range of the enormous fractal. And sitting there was the familiar face craning her neck to look over the rubble.

"You're okay!" Thea said with wide eyes when she spotted Zac. "I couldn't see the battle due to the palace, apart from that huge fractal toward the end. And was that Billy's head I spotted ten meters in the air?"

Zac smiled as he walked over, a great sense of relief filling his heart.

"Yeah, it was Billy; he came to help as well. That guy can really club things," Zac said as he gazed at Thea. "I was worried about you."

Thea's mouth curved upward in a smile for a second before her eyes turned downcast, and she looked down.

"Sorry I caused so much trouble for you." She sighed. "I got too greedy and caused all these problems."

“It’s okay. You saved my life from Inevitability with that protective skill. This was the least I could do,” Zac answered as he walked inside the gazebo. “What’s going on? Are you trapped somehow?”

It was a bit curious. The fight had ended over twenty minutes ago, but Thea still sat rooted here instead of fleeing or heading over to see what was going on.

“It’s these chains,” Thea muttered as she swung her leg.

Only now did Zac notice that her right leg was cuffed, and a chain was attached to a fixture in the ground. However, the chain wasn’t very thick, and Thea should have no problem ripping it apart, even though her main attribute was Dexterity.

“This thing?” Zac said with some confusion as he leaned closer. “Can’t you break it?”

“It’s some sort of treasure. It saps me of all my energy. The moment I gather any Cosmic Energy, the manacle sucks it out, and it gets released into the ground by the chain.” Thea sighed. “I can’t summon any of my strength; it feels like I’m back before the integration.”

Now that Zac gave it a proper look, it reminded him a bit of the large chains down in the ravine, those that Anzonil once had used in an effort to suppress his disciple. However, this was a much weaker version. Zac curiously looked at it, and after a brief hesitation, touched the chain with his hand, but he felt nothing. It was the same with the manacle itself, and after prodding about for a minute, he managed to open it up.

There wasn’t a lock holding the thing in place, but the clasp was tough to unclasp. It likely required at least 100 Strength to open, which was impossible for a prisoner in a weakened state. It was a pretty ingenious design, and having such a thing would perhaps be very convenient in the future.

“Can I take this?” Zac asked as he looked up, but he was startled when he saw Thea’s expression.

Her face was flushed, and she glared at him with enraged eyes.

“Had enough yet?” she wheezed out through gritted teeth.

“Wha—” Zac tried to ask but stopped himself as his eyes widened.

He finally realized that he had been too engrossed with the design of the chain, and his head had been sandwiched between her knees while he fiddled with the clasp for almost a minute. Zac immediately jumped a few steps away and coughed in embarrassment.

“You should absorb some energy, but we can’t stay long,” Zac said, completely glossing over the issue. “The emperor is dead, and Vasidas is badly wounded, and who knows, the Dominators might be on their way. It seems they all serve the same person, and they might have an alliance.”

“What? Who?” Thea said with confusion, her curiosity overcoming her anger.

“The Great Redeemer,” Zac said with a sigh.

“Salvation’s master? How is that possible?” Thea said skeptically.

“I am not sure about all the details yet, but it doesn’t look good for either Berum or Earth, to be honest,” Zac said with a shake of his head. “Let’s walk as we talk.”

The two started heading back toward Ylvas, and Zac explained what he’d learned about the Great Redeemer from the old champion, adding in his own speculations as he went. They also told each other what they had been up to since they got separated, though Zac glossed over some parts about his situation that needed to be kept secret.

He was shocked to find out about the defensive skill she used. Its effect was truly amazing. When she had lit up like a Christmas tree as they fell down the cliff, she had activated a teleportation skill. But that skill not only teleported her away, but it also gave an almost absolute defense until she was whisked away as well.

Using the skill had its clear drawbacks, though. It took some time to charge up the teleportation, and the cost of the skill was something far more expensive than Cosmic Energy. It cost levels to use, which explained why she hadn’t improved much while he was stuck in the tunnels. Thea herself wasn’t sure exactly how it worked, but her current guess was that the more damage the skill blocked while the teleportation charged up, the higher the cost would be.

The two kept talking and almost forgot that they had just survived a true life-and-death situation. They were dragged out of their bubble by heavy steps quickly approaching them. Zac looked up to see an almost mummified Billy running over with a smile that reached from ear to ear.

“Thea! Billy missed you!”

THE FINAL SPRINT

“Billy! It’s nice to see you,” Thea said with a smile to the incoming giant. “Zac told me you came to save me. You’re a real hero as well.”

“Ha ha, did you see Billy’s big thwunk?” Billy said and heroically flexed his muscles, but quickly stopped with a yelp due to his wounds.

“How are your wounds, Billy?” Zac asked.

“Billy will be okay. What happened with the scary spear guy?” he asked and looked around.

“I beat him up with the help of Alien-man,” Zac said.

Thea threw him a questioning glance, but he only responded with a slightly helpless shrug.

“Alien-man is even worse than Billy,” the giant said as he looked over in Ylvas’ direction. “He will become a pirate with a tree-leg.”

“Actually, Billy, you can regrow legs and arms,” Zac explained, “if you eat the right treasures.”

“Aliens are pretty impressive.” Billy nodded sagely, slightly missing the point.

“Uh, yeah,” Zac said and started walking toward Ylvas.

The old champion looked better, but it was still clear that the battle had noticeably aged him. There was a real cost to using life force as a fuel to one’s attacks, and Zac wouldn’t be surprised if Ylvas had lost over two hundred years, going by his appearance. Then again, that still meant he had much more time remaining than humans had in total before the integration.

“You’re looking better,” Ylvas said with a slightly weak voice as he opened his eyes. “I am glad your friend is okay. Vasidas has been an enigma since our worlds got integrated. I have no idea what he is thinking.”

“I’m sorry we couldn’t get him as well.” Zac sighed.

“It’s okay. Nenotheop was the spiritual pillar of the Medhin Empire. Losing him and almost half of the Medhin royals in a month should have a huge impact on their morale,” Ylvas said with a shake of his head. “Vasidas is one of the lesser-known royals, usually acting alone. He won’t have the same rallying power as Nenotheop did.”

“We also know more about the truth of the Medhin threat and can begin to spread the news the moment we get back. We might not be able to convince everyone, but a seed of doubt should be planted. Perhaps the Medhin will even become refugees, ousted from their position,” one of the soldiers next to Ylvas added.

“Sounds like you have things in hand. In any case, the three of us will leave now,” Zac said. “We don’t want to risk attracting those two Dominators. You should probably do the same.”

Ylvas nodded and arduously got to his feet.

“I would like to thank you again. Without the assistance of you and Billy, we would never have been victorious in this fight. Your strength is astounding, and I can’t imagine the power you will have when you reach the next stage. As promised, here is your reward,” Ylvas said and reached for his bag.

Zac quickly moved to stop Ylvas’ hand with a shake of his head.

“There’s no need for that. Everything changed when they caught Thea. I would have come here with or without you. Besides, I’ve already taken the emperor’s pouch; that’s more than enough. We have the same enemy. Who knows, if you manage to save yourself from the Great Redeemer, it might help us on Earth as well,” Zac said.

It was true. They still had no idea exactly what the Redeemer’s plans were; most were still conjecture. Perhaps losing just one of the planets would ruin the whole thing for him, saving Earth as well. It would be a worthwhile investment to leave Ylvas with his treasure so he could use it in eradicating the Medhin royals.

Ylvas looked surprised but slowly nodded his head in agreement.

“You will be remembered as the hero of Berum,” Ylvas said and stretched his hand forward. “I hope to meet you again in the vast cosmos.”

Zac grabbed his hand in a farewell before he started walking down the mountain with Billy and Thea in tow. As they walked down the mountain, Zac opened his status screen to allocate his free points. As he expected, he’d

already reached level 65, and he put the free points into Dexterity.

He knew he'd gain a large boost in Strength from the levels awarded from the hunt, so he needed to shore up his Dexterity a bit. Otherwise, there was nothing to note. He hadn't made any progress in his Daos, and he also hadn't gained any title, even though Nenotheop was the first proper E-grade cultivator he defeated.

He wasn't too surprised by the lack of title, but the situation with the Dao was a bit surprising. He had been through an extremely intense fight with the strongest enemy he'd ever encountered. There'd also been at least twenty warriors utilizing various Dao Seeds during that battle, yet he hadn't even gained a spark of inspiration.

It was as though something was missing in the air, or like he had blinders covering his head. If this battle had taken place on Earth, he was sure he would have advanced one of his seeds. But now he knew there was no point to sit down and meditate since there was nothing to meditate on.

He closed his status screen and turned his focus on his Cosmos Sack next. The moment he touched it, he was shocked to the point that he stumbled. Nenotheop was *rich*.

"You okay?" Thea asked with some concern but suddenly understood what was going on when she saw Zac's wide grin and his hand touching his pouch.

"Just a bit surprised is all," Zac said.

The Cosmos Sack had expanded with an entirely new section dedicated to Nenotheop's loot, and it was far bigger than the original space. There were simply mountains of treasure inside, far eclipsing what he'd gained even when taking Salvation's treasure.

It was also far more organized, with neatly arrayed sections depending on the type of valuable. There were also roughly thirty piles of random treasure, and Zac immediately realized that was the loot that Nenotheop still hadn't organized.

One particular item in the unsorted piles suddenly drew his attention. It was a large stone statue where the whole thing was just a face that smiled in an extremely creepy manner, and the reason he recognized it was because he had seen Thea sneak it into her pouch when she thought Zac wasn't looking when they'd hunted together.

When Zac had asked about the statue, she had been embarrassed about it until she admitted she liked kitsch and weird memorabilia. The statue wasn't

a treasure, but rather something she wanted to add to her private collection.

“Thea,” Zac said as he stopped, drawing the attention of Billy and Thea, who had been talking about their time in the hunt.

Zac moved his hand, and suddenly, a mountain of treasure appeared in front of him. Thea’s eyes widened in surprise before she looked at Zac.

“My treasures? I thought Vasidas had them?” she said.

“I guess Nenotheop took them from him to pass me on the ladder, though I don’t know if everything is there,” Zac said.

Thea immediately moved toward the pile of loot before she hesitated for a second.

“What do you want in return?” she asked.

“Nothing, they’re yours,” Zac said as he beckoned for her to take it. “More importantly, I have a proposition for you.”

“Thank you, I’ll remember this,” she said with a serious face as she put her treasure into her sack. “What do you have on your mind?”

“I can lend you enough treasure to reach the second spot on the ladder. In return, I’ll come and check out your library three days after the hunt ends. There are some things I want to look into,” Zac explained.

“You’re not worried that someone will pass us on the ladder if you split your loot like that?” Thea hesitantly said.

“That’s impossible,” Zac immediately said with a shake of his head, regretting it a bit when he noticed Thea’s incisive stare. “Also, Billy, how about I give you some treasure as well?”

“Mama said handouts should be saved for those in need. Billy is fine,” Billy said with a shake of his head, completely disinterested.

“But Ogras and I owe you a bit for taking the biggest rat, right?” Zac said, changing tactics. “I’ll just pay our debt right now. It’s not good when there are debts between friends, right?”

Billy seemed to think it over for a bit before he nodded with a smile.

“Right, no debt between friends,” he agreed.

“This all sounds fine, but let’s get away from here first. I don’t want to meet the Dominators while I still only have a small amount of Cosmic Energy in my body,” Thea interjected. “What are your plans for the last day of the hunt?”

“I will hunt as many beasts as I can here in the core area,” Zac said without hesitation. “The money and Cosmic Energy they give are very good even at my level, better than any hunting ground I have at home.”

“Billy also want to thwonk.” Billy nodded. “Billy is a genius in energy control; the stupid beasts are much easier to hit now.”

“Fine, let’s find a good hunting ground a few hours away and hunt in the same area. That way, we can help each other if we run into trouble.” Thea nodded.

They left the Medhin-controlled area without any troubles and found a good hunting spot roughly two hours away. They had gone in the opposite direction from the zones where the two Dominators stayed, which should hopefully ensure they didn’t run into each other.

As soon as they arrived, Zac forked over enough treasure to place Thea in the second position and Billy in the eighth. Doing so actually kicked Thomas Fischer down to the eleventh spot on the ladder, but Zac didn’t really care. It was not like they were allies anyway. Zac also took the opportunity to finally establish an alliance with Billyville before they got ready to split up to hunt beasts.

Each of them was strong enough that they could freely hunt without a party, and it would likely even slow them down to go together. There were a lot of beasts in the forests, but not to the point that three powerhouses could run together without taking food out of each other’s mouths.

“If we don’t see each other again in the hunt, we’ll see each other in three days,” Zac said to the other two.

When Zac had explained that he would visit Thea after the hunt, Billy immediately insisted that he wanted to come and play as well, so they all agreed to meet in Westfort, the main town that the Marshall Clan controlled.

Soon, Zac was alone in the forest, ripping through pack after pack of rabid beasts with wild abandon. He had accomplished everything he set out to do, and perhaps even more, in this hunt. It was a disappointment and a problem that the two Dominators would take the top positions in the Hunter Ladder, but there was simply nothing to do about that.

He had gained a score of levels, however, and a mountain of loot, which would help Port Atwood thrive in the future. He had also managed to set up quite a few alliances and even found out about the wealthy underworld. Apart from the splinter stuck in his head, the trial had exceeded his wildest expectations.

He couldn’t wait to get back now. He had trials to take, incursions to close, and so many unanswered questions that he needed to look into.

For now, though, he had beasts to kill. Zac entered an almost Zen state

where he methodically moved from pack to pack, the minutes turning to hours. In just a day, tens of thousands of beasts were ruthlessly mowed down, turning into money and Cosmic Energy for Zac.

Zac thought this would continue until the time ran out, but a shocking change took place when there were only thirty minutes left. He had passed Vasidas on the Hunter Ladder. The battle against the Medhin hadn't been enough, but between Verun injuring the royal and Zac's mindless grinding, he had been pushed to the third spot, increasing his position by one.

But just a few seconds later, he was once again pushed down a position, and Zac realized that Vasidas didn't want to give up the title. But if there was one thing that Zac could do, it was cause widespread damage. His reserves had long restored during the day, and the wound from the spear in his chest wasn't impeding him too much. He no longer held anything back, and fractal blades were soon destroying everything in the valley.

Zac didn't even have time to check the ladder anymore and instead gave everything he had to killing as many beasts as humanly possible until the world finally turned black.

LADDER REWARDS

The huge black walls that delimited the hunting grounds had shrunk at a rapid pace, swallowing hundreds of mountains by the second. In almost no time, the darkness was upon him, and Zac only managed to take a last glance at the Eastern Trigram Sect before everything turned black.

**[Congratulations on receiving the third position on the Hunter Ladder.
Awards distributed.]**

The unfeeling voice of the System suddenly echoed in his ears as an enormous surge of energy entered his body.

**[Congratulations on receiving the first position on the Gatherer Ladder.
Limited Titles Unlocked. Awards distributed.]**

**[Congratulations on receiving the first position on the aggregated
Ladder. Awarded +3 levels and Title Permanence.]**

The Gatherer announcement wasn't a surprise to Zac, but the Hunter Ladder was a welcome surprise. The mad dash at the end had proven successful, and he had beat out Vasidas for the third position, which meant he gained another two bonus levels from the hunt. But most interesting was the final prompt, a hidden reward of the hunt.

He had hoped that there would be something like this, but he hadn't been sure. While he didn't manage to get the highest position on the Hunter

Ladder, his average result was the best of all participants.

Inevitability was only on the fourth spot of the Gatherer Ladder, getting surpassed by himself, Thea, and Beruv Ylvas. He was a bit surprised that Ylvas had managed to beat out the Dominator, but he guessed he got the help of his army to push him past the Zhix at the end.

Harbinger, the second Dominator, got the fifth position, and Starlight, the Ishiate powerhouse, got the sixth. Thomas Fischer had managed to get himself back to the tenth position, while Billy remained at eighth. Neither Billy nor Thea managed to get into the top ten on the Hunter Ladder, unfortunately, but both were in the top 100. The days of captivity had unfortunately robbed Thea of her opportunity.

Zac guessed that Thomas had used the same tactic as the Medhin emperor, but he was surprised that he had enough pull to get people to donate their wealth to him. Perhaps it was just a temporary loan, like he had done with Thea.

However, he was a bit confused by the last reward. The bonus levels weren't very confusing; just what did Title Permanence mean? The Gatherer prompt also mentioned something about Limited Titles, which might be connected to the permanence. Zac opened the screen to see the results.

Name: Zachary Atwood

Level: 73

Class: [F-Rare] Hatchetman

Race: [E] Human

Alignment: [Earth] Port Atwood – Lord

Titles: Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt – 1st

Limited Titles-

Dao:Seed of Heaviness – High, Seed of Trees – High, Seed of Sharpness – Middle, Seed of Hardness – Middle, Seed of Sanctuary – Early

Core: [F] Duplicity

Strength: 533 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 121%]

Dexterity: 268 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 121%]

Endurance: 698 [Increase: 71%. Efficiency: 121%]

Vitality: 338 [Increase: 61%. Efficiency: 121%]

Intelligence: 119 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 121%]

Wisdom: 132 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 121%]

Luck: 120 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 121%]

Free Points: 24

Nexus Coins: [F] 273,280,383

Zac couldn't stop smiling when he saw that his attributes had taken another huge leap, part from his eight bonus levels, and part from his new title. He was also surprised to see that he had gained another row in his status screen, the Limited Titles that were mentioned earlier. However, there was nothing there, and there was no explanation on how Limited Titles differed from normal ones.

He tried focusing on the new row, but no matter what command he tried, he couldn't gain any additional information from the empty field. He guessed he would have to ask someone back in Port Atwood about it. Instead, he chose to check out his new title.

[Eastern Trigram Hunt – 1st: First Position in Eastern Trigram Hunt.

NOTE: Title Permanence Awarded. Reward: All Stats +10, All stats +5%]

It was a pretty huge bonus, though the ten flat points weren't as exciting any longer after he'd learned about the attribute gain of E-grade. But the bonus Luck it gave was extremely valuable, and the other attributes would surely help him during his upcoming trials. He wanted to check out a few more things, but he sensed he was getting moved again by the System.

His time inside the blackness was even shorter compared to when the event started, and just ten seconds later, he stood in his courtyard. He took a deep breath as tranquility entered his heart for the first time in a while. He

hadn't realized it, but ever since his clash with Inevitability, there had been a slight dread in the back of his mind, akin to a fear that the boogeyman would suddenly show up.

He had survived, however, and he was pretty much safe now on his island. He also knew he would have to change his plans to make his teleporter public. He couldn't risk letting those monsters teleport here. He would only dare to do such a thing when the Dominator threat was dealt with.

Before that, however, there were so many things to do. He quickly looked around for his mountain of treasure, and he was elated to see that the amazing Cosmos Sack from the hunt was still attached to his belt.

But he frowned a few seconds later when he noticed a problem. He had taken out a random weapon from the sack to make sure it still worked, but when he tried to put it back, nothing happened. A few tests later showed that the sack only allowed withdrawals now.

Sighing in disappointment, Zac realized that he couldn't use the sack permanently. He still wasn't in any hurry to empty it out. He would have to call Calrin and a couple of his best appraisers over to help him go through it first.

"You're back," a voice suddenly said from the side, and Zac looked over to see Ogras standing there.

"Shit, what happened to you?" Zac said with some surprise when he saw a large scar that went from right below his left horn down to his cheek.

"We've got a pretty exciting Mystic Realm on our hands," Ogras explained with a smile.

"Mystic Realm?" Zac repeated. "The infiltrators are dealt with?"

"It cost me most of my savings, but they're dead. There were actually a lot of them," Ogras said with a grunt.

"How did you do it?" Zac curiously asked.

"Ordered and set up a large array that covers the whole island. We can use it in the future to find anyone with an odd origin, like invaders or other aliens. But more importantly, how was the haul? We ready to do the inheritances?" Ogras said as his eyes started to glisten with greed.

"The returns were way above what I expected, honestly. But we can't do the inheritances just yet," Zac answered with a smile.

"Why not?" Ogras retorted, not being able to hide some of his impatience.

Zac snickered in response, and the next second, a pile of the beautiful

marble tiles appeared and covered the courtyard.

“Brazla has hounded me to improve his surroundings since the start. I think it’s best we do that before we do the inheritances. I wouldn’t be surprised if he would mess things up for us otherwise,” Zac explained.

Ogras’ eyes widened in understanding, and he nodded thoughtfully before he threw a scathing glance at the opulent towers rising above the tree line.

“Yeah, that’s probably for the best. Gotta keep that lunatic happy.” Ogras nodded.

“By the way, what is Title Permanence?” Zac asked, changing the subject.

“Title Permanence? No idea,” Ogras said with a frown. “Where did you hear that?”

“I got it as a bonus reward from the hunt,” Zac said and proceeded to explain the two temporary ladders in the hunt and their respective rewards.

“I think I understand now,” Ogras said with a thoughtful nod. “Title Permanence might be the best reward you got from that trial.”

“What do you mean?” Zac asked with some curiosity.

“I’ve already explained that there are a bunch of Mystic Realms out in the Multiverse that provide titles,” Ogras started, and Zac nodded in agreement. “However, most of those places only provide Limited Titles.”

“Limited Titles?” Zac asked with confusion.

He had a vague recollection of Alyn mentioning it, but that was during the month when she’d tried to cram a lifetime’s worth of knowledge into his head while he mined Nexus Crystals.

“You can only have three Limited Titles at a time. If you get a new one, you will have to discard one of the old ones or skip on getting the new one. They are separate from the normal titles,” Ogras explained.

“What, really?” Zac asked with some disappointment.

“You should be happy it’s like that. Just imagine if some wealthy assholes from the supreme clans spent a few hundred years traveling from Mystic Realm to Mystic Realm, getting thousands of titles? They would become monsters.” Ogras snorted. “Titles are a bonus from the Ruthless Heavens, but there is a limit to how much it can give. You can’t have the attributes of a C-grade old monster while at F-grade.”

“Fair enough, I guess,” Zac said with a shrug. “What’s this got to do with Title Permanence?”

“The hunt doesn’t sound like something that should give permanent

titles,” Ogras said. “I think the Title Permanence reward given to you is the Ruthless Heavens turning your Limited Title into a normal title. That way, it does not take up one of your slots. Is it together with your other titles?”

“It is.” Zac nodded after a second.

Ogras’ face started to scrunch up in a familiar way, and Zac felt a tirade was incoming, but a thought suddenly struck Zac.

“Do the Towers of Eternity give Limited Titles as well?” Zac asked.

“No, it’s one of the rare opportunities that gives real titles. That’s why it’s so popular. Apart from the Tower, you can almost only find places giving permanent titles by serendipity, like finding a rare treasure,” Ogras explained. “That your hunt awarded Title Permanence is likely a onetime thing.”

Zac nodded in understanding. There were a lot of things Zac wanted to ask the demon about the current situation of Port Atwood, and he was also curious about the Mystic Realm. However, there was one thing that trumped every other matter in importance, and it couldn’t wait.

“More importantly, I think we might be in deep shit,” Zac said with a somber expression.

Ogras’ eyes hardened, looking at Zac with a frown.

“What’s going on?”

From there, Zac recounted the parts of the hunts containing the battle with Salvation, the appearance of Inevitability, and what he’d learned from Beruv Ylvas. He finally added his own conclusions and guesswork about what he thought was going on.

Ogras had an unprecedentedly serious face after having heard what Zac said.

“We need to have a meeting immediately. We should hold it at the Towers of Myriad Dao so that spirit can provide input as well. I’ll gather the council,” Ogras responded.

Zac completely agreed, so in just twenty minutes, people started to gather in front of the doorways leading into the repository. Zac was already there, and he smiled when he saw his sister running toward him. Kenzie threw herself in his arms, hugging him tightly.

“I’m glad you’re okay. Lyla made the hunt seem like a real hell,” she said with red-rimmed eyes.

“It’s good to see you,” Zac said with a warm smile before his brows rose in some surprise when he realized what Kenzie said. “Lyla is actually okay?”

“Yes, but she returned after only six days. She said she got a token she

could crush to return home.” Kenzie nodded. “What happened to you? Did you find anything cool?”

“Let’s talk inside.” Zac smiled as he looked around at the others.

Abby floated not far away, and the council was all present apart from a few who likely were managing the other islands. Calrin was also there, his eyes glued to Zac’s Cosmos Sack. Zac had also asked Ogras to bring Julia, and she stood some distance from the others, looking a bit unsure of what to do.

Zac felt that the intelligence he’d gathered during the hunt was just too important to keep to himself, so he had already decided to brief Julia and then send her back as soon as possible. Since it looked like everyone else was present, Zac led the way inside the towers.

COUNCIL

“Why have so many come to beseech the Great Sage? I am sorry, but I do not accept disciples,” an arrogant voice echoed through the huge hall as the leaders of Port Atwood entered the Towers of Myriad Dao.

The next moment, Brazla appeared, this time adorned in a golden cultivator’s robe. Behind him was a huge golden sword that radiated a divine might, though Zac knew it was just an illusion. However, those who entered these halls for the first time couldn’t stop themselves from gasping, much to the Tool Spirit’s delight.

“We need to hold an extremely important meeting,” Zac explained, hurrying to add some compliments when he saw the Tool Spirit’s frown. “And I felt it would be rude not to include the Great Sage in such an important event. Who else would we turn to for wisdom?”

That seemed to placate the Tool Spirit, and it quickly took a pose, trying to convey wisdom. It might have worked if it wasn’t for Brazla’s nose pointing so far up in the air that his face was almost looking straight up.

Those in the group who hadn’t had the pleasure of meeting Brazla before couldn’t help but look back and forth between Zac and the Machiavellian Tool Spirit with utter confusion. Zac himself felt like he had swallowed a pile of shit, but he had to admit Brazla was far more learned than the others here.

“Very well, the great Brazla will listen in on your meeting,” he said and swung his sleeve.

The next moment, an extremely opulent conference table stood in front of them. However, even Zac couldn’t stop himself from glaring at the Tool Spirit when he saw the seating arrangements. There was one massive throne wrought from crystals and gold standing at the end, and it was pretty obvious

Brazla saved that one for himself.

As for the others, there were simple wooden stools that were so low that, if they sat down on them, they would barely be able to see above the table. It looked like Ogras' eyes would pop out of their sockets, but before he could explode, Zac intervened.

"Is this the hospitality of the great Brazla?" Zac said with some disappointment as he took out another inscribed tile. "I even brought these supreme tiles at great personal cost to beautify your surroundings, but if this is the reception we will receive, I should probably get some simpler things."

He felt a bit shameless about his words, but common sense held no sway under this roof, so he could only play along. Brazla seemed almost entranced by the beautiful tile, and a second later, the paltry stools were replaced with proper chairs for everyone.

"I have gathered you all today to brief you on my experiences inside the hunt. I have learned some extremely troubling things about our new world and need your input on how we should proceed from here." Zac started the meeting without any preamble.

The mood around the table quickly got serious, with even Brazla staying quiet as Zac described the events of the hunt. Of course, he glossed over some parts, such as his dual classes and his meeting with Anzonil and anything about the **[Heart of Oblivion]**.

"So, there you have it. It is very possible that an old monster is currently heading toward us, and it does not seem it would end well if he found us. We need to figure out some precautions against this," Zac finally said as he looked at the faces around the table.

There was a subdued silence, and most were looking down at the table with a frown or in fear. Zac understood the feeling well. There were so many enemies to contend with as it was, and suddenly, there was an even stronger bad guy thrown into the mix.

"Excuse me, did you say that there were no incursions on this other planet you partook the trial with?" Abby suddenly said, her enormous eye glistening with interest.

"Yes, no incursions ever appeared." Zac nodded. "Why, is it important?"

"It might not be important, but I think I understand why this Redeemer gave such a task to his chosen," Abby said as she bobbed above her chair.

"A newly integrated planet without incursions is practically unprecedented. It is the standard test of the System, and there are more than

enough willing parties to go around. But I believe that the Great Redeemer has found a way to stop that,” she said.

“Stop how?” Zac asked.

“I can’t be sure, but I think it has to do with the conquest. If the Great Redeemer simply needed some people with the cultivation technique to survive until the planet integrated, why didn’t he tell his chosen to move into the mountains and cultivate away from the earth? Why risk their lives to dominate their whole planet?”

“I think he has somehow managed to tag his targeted planets as his own through this conquest, and since the planet is instantly owned by an existing faction when it gets integrated, no incursions spawn.”

“But we have incursions on our planet?” Kenzie questioned.

“Yes, because the Dominators failed in their task. I heard a massive war took place where the whole Zhix population banded together against the Dominators. Perhaps there would be no incursions if they had managed to dominate their planet before they arrived. Perhaps this can be a clue to their plans?” Abby continued.

“The fulcrum thing?” Zac asked.

“No, I think that is different. But we must ask ourselves, if the goal of the subjects of the Great Redeemer is to dominate planets, why haven’t we even seen their shadows since the integration took place? I think it’s exactly due to those incursions that have popped up,” Ogras interjected.

“There is another possibility. You said you believe that this guy is D or perhaps even C-grade? But look at our incursions. We have the Church of Everlasting Dao here; that’s at least a B-grade force,” Ogras added.

“Even worse, the Undead Empire is here, and they have A-grade old monsters holding the fort, perhaps even stronger beings. Even a C-grade Monarch would think twice before offending these forces by stealing a planet from out under their noses,” the demon finished. “And that’s only two of the ones we know of; there might be more powerful factions here.”

“So they actually want us to defeat those forces without getting their hands dirty, so their boss doesn’t get blamed?” Kenzie said with a frown.

“Exactly. And it’s not like we can ignore the incursions. Both those forces are lunatics who leave planets without a single living soul within a few years.” Ogras sighed.

“Damned if you do, damned if you don’t,” Zac muttered before looking up. “So, what do we do?”

“Sell yourself,” Ogras suddenly said.

“What?” Zac gaped.

“We obviously need to close those incursions and somehow also kill those Dominators. But we have no idea if that’s enough, right? Perhaps that Redeemer can still find us. Those Dominators might have hidden some means on some remote corner of the planet already,” Ogras explained, his careful nature showing.

“So we need another reason for the Great Redeemer to back away. And that’s where you come in. You’re a humanoid behemoth, and you might be able to join a sect strong enough for the Great Redeemer to back away.”

“Is that really possible? Would he back away just because I joined a sect?” Zac asked skeptically.

“If you become an important disciple, then attacking your home will be akin to attacking the sect itself. But it depends on how crazy the guy is.” Ogras shrugged. “If he is rational, he would back away if the force is strong enough. No need to risk his life over a baby planet, right?”

“It’s a plan, but it’s easier said than done. We can’t even leave this world; the Nexus Hub is inactive,” Zac said. “And even if it activated, how would we even be able to get to such a sect? From what I understand, it’s extremely hard to travel to higher-grade places.”

It was true. One of the first things he’d asked Ogras was why he didn’t simply teleport to an A-grade world to cultivate there instead of coming to a place like Earth. The situation for the poorest saps on an A-grade continent would likely be better than even the kings of a D-grade world.

But it was extremely hard to travel upward, even though it was something everyone wished to do. There essentially were only two ways. First was getting your hands on a Nexus Token of high enough tier.

Nexus Tokens were tickets to a random place. If you had a C-grade token, you would be sent to a teleporter on a C-grade world. But you had no idea where, and you might end up at some extremely dangerous place rather than at a public teleporter in some capital.

These tickets were generally given by the System as rewards for various hard quests. You needed to prove you deserved to travel to those higher-grade cultivation paradises. Perhaps Zac would be able to get one when he reached D-grade after becoming the world leader, but that was far off.

Another way to move upward was to get an invite from a high-tier force, which would allow you to teleport to them. But those tokens were extremely

rare as well, and they could only be awarded to sects or clans from quests by the System.

Essentially, you needed to earn passage one way or another, and you couldn't just move about as you wished. The System clearly did not want free movement in the Multiverse. Ogras believed it had to do with limited resources. If wastrels could go to high-tier planets and snatch divine treasures for themselves, things would get crazy. No one would want to stay on the lower planes.

“Well, there is one place where you can showcase your power in front of a bunch of people from various powerful forces, and that has always been a place where rogue cultivators find established forces to take them in,” Ogras pointedly said. “You simply need to climb high enough to prove your potential.”

Zac immediately understood what Ogras was talking about. The Tower of Eternity. It made sense that the powerful factions in the Multiverse would send invitation tokens with their scions there. If they could recruit some extremely powerful unaffiliated cultivators while they were still young and only at F-grade, they might form ties with a future powerhouse while they still were weak.

“We will have to try everything out.” Zac nodded. “But we still don't know what he wants with us.”

“Origin Dao,” Brazla suddenly muttered.

“Excuse me?” Zac said and looked over at the Tool Spirit, who seemed quite content to be the object of everyone's attention.

“I would bet he is after the Origin Dao of your baby planet. You should have realized that your accomplishments in the Dao are far higher compared to normal D-grade planets. It's much easier for you to gain Dao Seeds compared to the norm,” Brazla started lecturing. “Perhaps you think you're very talented. But in truth, you just have a superior environment.

“This is not unique for this planet. In fact, it's the same with all baby worlds. Even invaders benefit from it,” the Tool Spirit continued.

Zac shot a glance at Ogras, who slightly nodded to indicate that Brazla was correct.

“Why is that? It is due to what some call the Origin Dao. The process of integrating a world is partly to gradually infuse its core with massive amounts of energy while also imbuing it with Origin Dao,” Brazla continued.

“Most of it is lodged in the world core, but everyone who has gained a

Dao Seed will also carry this Dao essence for a bit. Over time, it will disintegrate and turn into normal spiritual energy. The System uses it to awaken the area to the higher truths of the cosmos so that cultivation becomes possible,” the Tool Spirit explained.

“And you think the Great Redeemer is after this?” Zac asked.

“Yes, that would explain why he went through all this trouble instead of just buying a couple of planets. He needs to get to a newly integrated world quickly if he wants to harvest the Origin Dao.” Brazla shrugged.

“What would he use this Origin Dao for?” Kenzie probed.

“No idea, but I would venture he has devised an unorthodox method that might allow him to break through whatever bottleneck he is stuck on,” Brazla said. “Sacrificing a couple of worlds to reach a higher grade wouldn’t be anything special in the Multiverse.”

A subdued silence stretched across the table. Some, like Julia, seemed physically sick at the thought of some old man being ready to kill billions of people just for a chance to break through a bottleneck. It was a chilling reminder of the ruthless reality they lived in.

NEWS

“Is this something common?” Zac finally asked, breaking the subdued silence in the room.

“No. Finding newly integrated planets before the Origin Dao disappears is notoriously hard. It’s hard enough to make me wonder if you’re even in any danger at all.” The Tool Spirit shrugged. “The old monsters in the Multiverse could probably do it, but they have no use for baby planets. They rather have their sights on whole Sectors with millions of integrated planets.”

The discussion continued a bit on the topic of the Great Redeemer, but it appeared that they did not have any more ideas on how to handle the situation. In the end, they decided to simply continue their original approach, closing the incursions of Earth.

Even though the Redeemer was the largest threat Earth faced, it looked like they had some time before he could arrive. The Multiverse was extremely vast, and traveling to a newly integrated planet could only be done manually. When that was added to the System’s protective obscuring, it would at least take a few years before he could arrive, even if the Redeemer had set out the moment their planet was integrated.

After the incursions were dealt with, they would turn their attention to Salvation and the Dominators. Of course, if they could find Salvation earlier, that would be preferable. But there was still no news of where he was physically located, and he had closed his teleporter the moment he was booted out from the hunt. Zac’s relentless assault had clearly put the fear of God in him, and he seemed to want to avoid another clash for the time being.

“That’s it for the time being,” Zac said before he turned to Julia. “Ms. Lombard, I brought you here so that you can provide the information to

Thomas Fischer and the others. All the large forces need to be made aware of the threat of Salvation and the Great Redeemer so that we can prepare.”

“Provide the information how?” she hesitantly asked.

“The portal to New Washington has already been made private, but I am traveling to the Marshall Clan in three days. I thought I’d bring you since they aren’t as isolated as we are here on this island,” Zac explained.

Julia hesitated a bit with a slight frown.

“And you’re just letting me go like that?” Julia said.

“Yes, the New World Government is not my enemy; the Great Redeemer and the incursions are. And honestly, they aren’t a threat either. If it wasn’t for the Dominators lurking in the shadows, I would already have made my teleporter public,” Zac said.

“If... I wanted to stay here, could I?” Julia suddenly asked, making Zac remember Emily mentioning the huge fight Julia and Emma had gotten themselves into.

“You can. Tell me your decision before I leave in three days, though, so I can send a replacement to the government.” Zac nodded before he turned back toward the others at the table.

“Calrin, I want you to try to buy an information package about the Great Redeemer, if that’s possible,” Zac said as he turned to the Sky Gnome.

“Information becomes more expensive the stronger the person. Also, while the information houses track many powerhouses, there is no way to track everyone. But I will make an inquiry,” Calrin said with a serious face.

Zac nodded before he addressed the whole room again.

“The rest of the meeting will only need the essential personnel,” Zac said, and soon less than half of the participants remained.

“The Great Redeemer is a pretty big headache, but on more positive news, I come back with a mountain of treasure. It’s to the point that we now have the resources to nurture a large number of experts without feeling the pinch. I am therefore opening the craftsman Heritage. I have also found this,” Zac said as he took out the ten crystals he got from Anzonil.

“As I mentioned, we were placed at the ruins of a sect called the Eastern Trigram Sect. It was a low-tiered D-grade sect focusing on arrays, and this is the complete crystallized knowledge on formations, written by their supreme elder. As far as I know, this is the only copy from that place,” Zac said.

Brazla snorted disdainfully, but the others looked at the ten crystals with wide eyes.

“Does anyone have an idea of how to utilize this knowledge as effectively as possible?” Zac asked as he looked around.

“It should be locked behind Merit Points, and I believe that the same should go for the Heritages,” Abby finally said. “We can portion out the knowledge it contains into packages, with the basic ones being pretty cheap, but the more in-depth and uncommon knowledge having a higher price.”

“Wouldn’t there be a risk of no one buying it? We are in need of skilled Array Masters,” Zac said.

“Then make sure people know that becoming an Array Master and helping to maintain the arrays in Port Atwood would yield a lot of Merit Points. Things given freely are not appreciated, but if they need to work hard for it, they will cherish it,” Abby countered, and Ogras nodded in agreement.

“It will also lock the craftsmen to us all the way until the D-grade, since they would have to come to us for the follow-up crystals or deeper parts of the craftsman Heritage,” Abby added. “Otherwise, we would risk them leaving for the highest bidder when the world gets more integrated in the future.”

Zac had to admit it was a thought-out idea, and he immediately decided to go along with it.

“Talk with the Merit Exchange and make adjustments to our current merit program if needed,” Zac said. “I want people working toward these things as soon as possible.”

Abby bobbed a bit in the air, which was her way of nodding her head. Zac nodded back before he once again focused on the Sky Gnome.

“After this meeting, please bring a couple of your best men to my courtyard; we have mountains of loot to go through,” Zac said.

Calrin suddenly looked at him like a maiden in love, and it made Zac’s hair stand on end.

“While we’re here, please update me on what’s happened while I was away,” Zac said.

“The shape-shifters are dealt with, as you know,” Ogras started. “Your human friend they impersonated has recovered, and he is currently farming on one of the satellite islands.”

Zac frowned a bit when he heard that, and Ogras quickly continued.

“Don’t get worked up; it was at his own request. That shape-shifter did a number on him, and I think he just wants to live a simple life away from the struggle of the real world,” Ogras said with a shrug. “Also... we have put

your former lover on that island at your sister's insistence, and she is farming with him. Under supervision, of course."

Zac looked over at Kenzie, who seemed ready for an argument.

"It wasn't all her fault. She was drugged, hypnotized, and manipulated. You're a victim, but so is she. Janos has helped her stabilize her mind during the past weeks, and she feels really bad about what happened. So I sent her to the island to stay with her friend," she quickly explained, the words tumbling out of her mouth.

Zac shot a glance over at the illusionist, who was also present at the meeting, and he simply nodded slightly to indicate what Kenzie said was true. Ogras only snorted, which drew an angry glare from Kenzie.

"Fine. I'll check in on them later. Anything else?" Zac said after hesitating a bit.

"A monk came a week ago and warned us that things were getting bad in the undead incursion. Their armies are mobilizing for real now, and the monk said that the Abbot believed that they would make a huge push to expand their territory within a month." Adran spoke up, reading from his documents.

Zac thoughtfully nodded. He had already been thinking about tackling the undead incursion as soon as possible, and now it seemed they did not have much of a choice. The only problem was the Lich King and how strong he would be. Was his increase in power from the hunt enough to bring that thing down?

"The monk also spoke about odd rumors that had arrived to their mountain," Adran said.

"What rumors?" Zac asked.

"Three incursions have disappeared. Just vanished overnight. The human government or the beastmen have no idea what's going on," the administrator said.

"Infighting between incursions?" Zac ventured.

"Unlikely," Ogras said. "They wouldn't likely clash before they battled for territories. And only the undead incursion has spread to that degree to my knowledge. The other ones should be a few years away from infighting. Right now, they should be swallowing up the locals around them, either for enslavement or eradication."

"So who is it?" Zac said.

"The only one I can think of are the Zhix, or rather, the Dominators," Ogras said.

“The Dominators? Only Void’s Disciple was outside the hunt; it did that by itself? Also, why would they wait until now to destroy incursions?” Zac asked.

“They might have needed to prepare the attacks. If we go by the theory that the Great Redeemer didn’t want to create trouble by having his followers destroy incursions, we can make some guesses. First, they would have wanted to close the incursions as quickly as possible before any contact with the home world was possible,” Ogras said.

“But as far as I know, no incursions were closed in the early stage of the integration. I have the title for the first closing,” Zac said.

“We know that the Dominators were a small group before the integration, and most thought them eradicated. We also know the availability of the teleporters in the beginning. Perhaps they simply didn’t have the ability to do it. That left them with a far more risky plan B,” Ogras explained.

“By now the incursions are all stabilized, and communication with the main side is possible. If they assaulted the incursions the normal way, it would be possible to record it in a crystal, allowing the elders of the force to realize who the responsible party was by the energy signature,” the demon continued.

“So if they closed the incursions now, they would need to immediately decimate everyone before they could send any information back home. That tracks with the rumors of incursions ‘simply disappearing,’” Zac continued the line of thought. “But why wait until now?”

“With the strongest people in the hunt, most settlements have turtled up, avoiding the incursions,” Kenzie ventured. “There would be no local witnesses either.”

“Preparing such a blitz would also take time. They would need to prepare the means to instantly kill everyone before they could send anything back home. Perhaps they also had some sort of interference that messed with the Nexus Hub,” Ogras added.

“Also, the only incursions that disappeared were those we would categorize as low threat. The undead incursion wasn’t touched, for example. Even the Dominators probably aren’t confident in destroying those incursions without leaving any trace,” Adran finished.

“So they’re removing the smaller obstacles, making us focus on the larger threats that they cannot deal with themselves,” Zac muttered. “But we don’t know for sure it was Void. I’ll talk with the Zhix to see how their ladders

have changed. Have we heard any other rumors about what the Dominators have been doing? I know that Void's Disciple has been up to something."

"We haven't heard anything, but our intelligence network is beyond pathetic," Ogras said with a shrug. "You should ask those people from the Marshall Clan; they should be more informed."

"Fine, but keep your ears to the ground. I have opened many new alliances, so we should start getting visitors soon. Make sure we control the movement of those who arrive. I don't want anyone wandering into my area or our hunting grounds. The barghest are a resource that should be saved for the Academy unless people are willing to pay for it," Zac said.

"All procedures should be set up to handle an inflow of visitors. If needed, we can also use the Origin Array to look for things out of place occasionally," Adran said. "On the topic of the barghest, I do believe we should try to cordon off areas that we can use as hunting grounds for visitors. Their numbers are increasing, and the Beast Master we are training is not strong enough to control such a large horde."

"Great, try to set something up; extra income is always welcome, but it's not a top priority. Anything else that has happened while I was gone?" Zac continued.

"We finally found land," Adran said. "In fact, we have found land in two opposite directions."

RESCUE MISSION

“Finally,” Zac said with a smile.

He had almost started believing they were stuck in some parallel world. The ships he had bought from the Creators were extremely swift, but it had taken months until they finally found the mainland. It also showed just how huge the new planet was. It felt as though their current mass was far larger than just the combination of the four integrated planets.

Perhaps the System had thrown some random landmass into the mix to make the distances larger. But suddenly, he gave a start since he finally realized what Adran had said.

“What do you mean two opposite directions?” he curiously asked. “Have we rounded the planet?”

“We have found the continent that you humans now refer to as Pangea to the east,” Adran explained with a shake of his head. “We have already made the first contact with a few settlements along the shoreline. If needed, we will have no problem conquering a pretty large swathe of coastline. We found one government-controlled city, but most are small settlements without teleportation arrays.”

“But the land in the opposite direction is something else?” Zac asked with interest.

“Yes, though it was further away compared to the main continent. The first one we found one week after you left for the hunt. The second we only found ten days ago. We didn’t find any settlements or people on that continent, though we have only begun our exploration recently,” Abby explained.

“Along the coastal edge is a lush forest, but after a few hours’ walk

inland, there is an impossibly vast desert. The heat there is scorching even to the demons, and there did not seem to be any life as far as we could tell,” Abby said. “The Cosmic Energy was, however, very dense, so if we could transform the desert, it would become great unoccupied land.”

“Impossibly large desert?” Zac muttered. “That actually brings me to something else I didn’t mention from the hunt.”

Next, he proceeded to explain his meeting with the Molemen in the hunt and the history of their planet.

“If I’m not mistaken, the other continent might be the remains of this fourth world. Since it was scorched by their sun for millennia, there should have only been unlivable deserts on the surface,” Zac said. “Perhaps the System simply took their uninhabitable land and made a continent out of it. Perhaps merged it with parts of Africa and the Middle East. I haven’t really heard anything from those regions since the integration.”

“So why did you not mention this fourth race earlier?” Ogras suddenly asked. “To protect the identity of us demons? I think that ship has sailed now. The existence of the underworld will quickly spread, I think.”

“No, it’s for a different reason. I want a team to dig as far down as possible from our mine. Even below our Nexus Vein if possible. Then place a teleportation array down there.”

“You want to connect Port Atwood to the people underground?” Kenzie asked.

“Yes, there are people from the other races down there as well, though most are dead now. They’re in pretty dire straits. They’re beset by another incursion that I guess is top tier. For some reason, the teleporters above the ground can’t reach down, so we need to dig as well, create a relay system of teleporters if need be.” Zac nodded.

“Why all that effort for those people?” Ogras said with disinterest.

“Not only are there fire golems that seem to be digging toward our planet’s core down there, but there’s also a huge amount of riches. Most of the top names on the Wealth Ladder are down there. Nexus Crystals and precious metals are littering the walls,” Zac said.

“We need to save those poor people,” Ogras said with a completely straight face, and Calrin quickly gave his wholehearted support for the plan as well.

Kenzie glared at the two people who only cared about the wealth, before turning back toward Zac with a frown.

“Yes, the reason I want to dig is partly selfish. They are currently loaded with minerals and crystals down there, but they are severely lacking everything else. I want Port Atwood to be the one to reap the benefits before any others. But other forces might try the same. The Ratmen are few in number, but I am sure others than I managed to find out about the situation in the underworld,” Zac said.

“So it’s a race for the wealth beneath us,” Calrin muttered.

“Exactly.” Zac nodded. “We have an advantage with the mine that is already quite deep, but we can’t be lax. I want those teleporters up as soon as possible.”

Abby quickly bobbed her head in agreement. She had been vehemently in favor of expanding the power of Port Atwood, since she wasn’t without ambition herself. But that worked just fine for Zac as well.

“It might be an issue of distance apart from just depth, though,” the Stargazer interjected. “If the Ratmen are situated far beneath the other continent, the distance might be too far. That continent is even further away than Pangea, after all. Perhaps we should also establish a frontier base on the desert continent and try to find them that way.”

“That would be even better,” Ogras muttered. “If the underworld only can be reached from that other continent, we will be able to control every coming and going. We are right in the middle in between the two continents, and we would act as a bridge between them. And there wouldn’t be much the other forces could do about it until we get higher-graded teleporters.”

Zac’s eyes lit up from the possibility presented. It was true. The E-grade teleporters reached far, but they couldn’t take Zac to the far edge of Pangea. Judging by the distance Abby and Adran had mentioned, the distance between the two continents was extremely vast. They would have to transit through Port Atwood.

“Abby, you oversee the project since you can map out the scope of my kingdom. Does my sphere of influence reach downward as well?” Zac asked.

“I will. There is a limit a few kilometers below us. I will find a location at that depth that is far away from energy interference. I will also set it up so that it becomes a proper relay station. Preferably, there would be no way to get up to the surface without using our teleporter,” the Stargazer said.

“Great, pursue both strategies. Setting up a base on the other continent is a good idea in any case.” Zac nodded before turning to Ogras. “Next. Is there something we can make use of in the Mystic Realm?”

“Not sure,” Ogras said with a shrug.

“Not sure?” Zac asked with some confusion. “What sort of place is it?”

“Well, it’s a pretty odd Mystic Realm,” Ogras hesitantly said. “First of all, it’s populated.”

“What?” Zac said with surprise. “Cultivators?”

Zac wasn’t an expert in the subject, but he knew that inhabited Mystic Realms were very rare.

“Indeed, of multiple species, no less,” Ogras said. “But that’s not the odd thing. The whole Mystic Realm is one enormous construct.”

“What?” Zac said with shock. He had never heard of such a thing before. “How big?”

“I can’t be sure. Even the person I caught and questioned wasn’t sure. But it is many times larger than Port Atwood. I found a few gardens that each was at least a fifth the size of this whole island, and they just took up a small corner of the construct,” Ogras explained.

Clearly this was news to everyone apart from Kenzie, and they looked over at Ogras with shock.

“The people there have been stuck inside a very long time. Tens of generations. They do not seem to know much of the outside, and they are not really in control of the functions and arrays of the large structure. They are like parasites living inside the body of a large beast,” Ogras explained, the others listening in rapt attention.

“How strong are they?” Zac asked with a frown.

He had enough enemies to contend with at the moment, and if these people were too strong, he might just as well close the passage and wait until he became stronger.

“I battled two Peak F-grade warriors, one human and a werewolf. There are at least mid-tier E-grade warriors there as well, leading the factions. However, energy is limited, and it seems the various factions are partly warring as a means of population control apart from the usual reasons,” Ogras explained.

“From what I can tell, the structure was once a hidden research facility. It might have connections to Technocrats, or they simply had a hand in constructing the thing. But to find out the real purpose, we would have to explore further,” Ogras said. “The human I captured did not even know how they got there. My personal guess is that their ancestors were caught for experimentation.”

Zac slowly nodded, not sure what to do with the news.

“Can we gain any benefits in the short run from there?” Zac asked.

“There are enormous trees, so we could get unlimited timber. The walls are also made from some very durable alloy; perhaps we could strip the walls and take the materials for weapons manufacturing. But apart from that, not much else, honestly. But with this Redeemer problem, we could use it as a last-resort escape. We just need to figure out a way to stop the Redeemer from following us,” Ogras said.

“But then we’d be stuck inside there?” Zac skeptically asked.

“Yes, but alive. The rift drops us off in a section that the current factions can’t access. It’s the area with the large gardens. Apparently, they were used for plant experimentation and providing air. There are no strong beasts, only a few worms at level 70,” Ogras explained.

“The whole place runs on some Technocrat technology, it seems. The trapped factions have very low access and can’t get to where we arrive. But that same technology provided me with Tier-3 access. According to the human I caught, the natives have no access at all. I figure I managed to get it because I am an outsider.

“I didn’t have time to do much exploration, but my access is pretty useful. It allows me to visit even more places than the natives, who only have limited access in their respective zones through some sort of array breaking,” the demon continued. “Perhaps we can find some good things hidden in the unexplored areas of the Mystic Realm.

“If the Redeemer arrives, we could drop off the noncombatants there and hide the passage. It would keep them out of harm’s way until the threat was dealt with. If the Redeemer wins, they would avoid being harvested at least, and perhaps they can find a way to get out in the future,” Ogras said.

“Well, it’s a decent last-ditch escape, though I am not a fan of getting stuck inside a Mystic Realm just waiting for the Great Redeemer to break through,” Zac mused. “Do you think we could set up some sort of alliance with the natives? Perhaps they possess things of value.”

Ogras hesitantly nodded.

“Perhaps. I honestly did not make a great first impression, though they attacked first. But there should be various things they lack, and they might have an abundance of things in there that may be extremely valuable on the outside. That’s usually how it goes with Mystic Realms. But as long as we don’t have anyone strong enough to counter their elites, I think we should

avoid them,” the demon said.

“We’ll keep it on the back burner, then, since we have a few things that need to be handled first. Apart from getting access to the underworld, I have a few more top-priority tasks for the town,” Zac said. “First, I want the surroundings of the Towers of Myriad Dao to be brought to its proper glory. I want this done within the day. Divert all manpower to this if necessary.”

Everyone around the table apart from Ogras and Brazla looked at Zac as though he’d lost his marbles.

“Finally, you’re speaking some sense,” Brazla said with a satisfied nod.

“Of course. Incidentally, in case you need to prepare anything before letting us undertake the inheritance trials, now would be the time for that. At least two trials will be started within three days,” Zac added.

“The great Brazla has been ready for eons; just come by and display your feeble might,” Brazla said with a snort.

“Great. Secondly, I need to index all the treasures I looted. Calrin, my place in an hour. Bring a few trustworthy and knowledgeable people,” Zac said, ending the meeting.

Roughly forty minutes later, five Sky Gnomes stood eagerly waiting in his courtyard. Most seemed to be around the same age as Calrin himself, but one of them looked positively ancient.

“These are my most trusted appraisers,” Calrin said as he indicated the three gnomes roughly his own age. “And this is my great-uncle Gemidir Thayer, the member of my clan with the most experience in figuring out the functions of odd treasures. I thought he would be an asset as well in case you had some hard-to-appraise items.”

“He’s also a notorious thief,” one of the other gnomes muttered under his breath as he shielded his Cosmos Sack, drawing a glare from the old man.

FOUR GATES

“You shouldn’t slander others, little Acorn.” The old man sighed with disappointment. “You know those days are long behind me. And wildly exaggerated.”

“Then why is that pouch belonging to that guard earlier tied around your waist?” the younger Sky Gnome said with a scathing glare.

“You! You just want the Lord to focus on my fingers so that he won’t notice you undervaluing the goodies!” the old man angrily spat as he quickly hid the pouch in an inner pocket of his robe.

Zac’s brows rose, especially when Calrin did nothing to correct the two.

“Well, to be a successful thief, you need to be able to discern what’s valuable and what to discard, no?” Calrin said with a cough after seeing Zac’s glare. “But he’s all retired now. And you have me to oversee everything, so you don’t need to worry about a thing.”

Zac groaned in response, hating that he couldn’t get a second opinion anywhere as things stood. But he knew that even if Calrin skimmed a bit of money, it wouldn’t be too bad. Furthermore, since he owned a sizeable share of the Consortia, it would still come back into his pocket in the end.

“The goal here is essentially to identify the treasures I gathered and then differentiate the loot into three categories,” Zac explained. “The first category is the valuable and essential treasures. I’ll keep those myself and personally hand them out to our elites if needed.

“The second is for items to add to our Merit Exchange. We are working against the clock, so things that can help empower our forces and provide speedy gains. The final category would be things that might be valuable but aren’t of use to Port Atwood. These items would be sold through the

Consortia,” Zac finished.

The Sky Gnomes eagerly nodded at the instructions, each of them almost looking possessed by greedy demons. Zac sighed and started taking things out. He started with the items he was the most curious about.

A glass bottle suddenly appeared in Zac’s hand, and the alchemist’s cauldron appeared on the ground in front of them. The pill was the thing he was most curious about, and the cauldron might help give some clues to its origins. Just a waft of its residual vapors had allowed him to gain a level, so he couldn’t imagine the efficacy of the pill itself.

“This is a pill with spirituality, which I found in this cauldron. When I opened the cauldron, a cloud was released, and the energy it contained both gave me a level and instantly healed me,” Zac said as he handed over the bottle. “Can you identify the pill?”

One of the Sky Gnomes quickly took out a huge book, and when he opened it, Zac saw it was filled with pictures of pills along with descriptions alongside them. However, the old thief only took a glance at it before he spoke up.

“It’s a **[Four Gates Pill]**; it’s a mid-tier E-grade pill,” he said, not without some longing. “It’s the first time I’ve heard of one with spirituality, though. The cauldron is just a Decent E-grade cauldron. Perhaps worth 70 million.”

“What’s the purpose of the pill?” Zac asked.

“It harnesses the four elements to break open nodes,” Gemidir succinctly explained. “It would likely have an additional effect now that it has spirituality.”

“Four elements?” Zac repeated before he quickly took out the three spirit herbs he looted from the hidden garden. “Do you think these are the ingredients used?”

“**[Blistering Ice Bamboo]**, **[Phoenix Peppers]**, and **[Rock Ginseng]**, and their ages are excellent,” another of the gnomes exclaimed.

“You’re only missing **[Sky Reed]** and you would have all four main components to create the pill,” the old man added.

“I found these three growing in a secluded spot, along with a broken paddy,” Zac explained. “I looted both the special soil and all the plants. Would we be able to keep growing these herbs?”

“Certainly,” the Sky Gnome who recognized the herbs said without hesitation. “However, it takes over fifty years to grow these herbs to maturity without skilled farmers who can shorten that duration, and that’s only to get

their minimum efficacy. For the herbs to contain this much energy, you would need to wait a few hundred years, even with a skilled farmer.”

Zac sighed in disappointment. Fifty years might not be very long for a force in the Multiverse, but it was for Zac, who was strapped for time.

“See if you can buy aged [**Sky Reed**], then,” Zac said. “How long would it take for us to train an alchemist who could concoct [**Four Gates**] pills?”

“If you want those pills to use, might I suggest an alternative method?” Calrin said.

“What’s that?” Zac asked.

“Trade the herbs for finished pills,” Calrin said.

“People would do that?” Zac asked skeptically.

“It’s pretty common among alchemists,” Calrin explained. “Another way for them to enrich themselves. They give ratios, for example, four sets of herbs for two pills. If they manage to create the two pills with less than four sets, they can pocket the difference as profit. But with the age of these herbs, we should be able to get pretty good ratios.”

Zac slowly nodded.

“Does anything else than the ratios matter?” Zac asked.

He had encountered a few pills by now, but most of them were simple healing pills that generally used life-attuned energy or roused the body’s own restorative powers. But things like cultivation pills were still not something he was very knowledgeable about.

“The skill of the alchemist,” Gemidir said. “Different qualities of the pills have differing effects.”

Pills used the same grading system as Daos, depending on the materials used. So a pill could be anything from Low grade to Peak grade, and the effect could vastly differ.

However, the same pill could also have different quality. Obviously, the same pill concocted by a fresh acolyte and a great Alchemy Master would differ greatly in efficacy, even if the materials used were the same.

The master would be able to extract more of the valuable essence of the herbs, and he would be able to remove more impurities. So a pill that had slowly been refined for millennia to the point it had gained spirituality would most likely produce a far greater effect than normal.

“I’ll hold on to these for now,” Zac said.

The herbs he owned possessed an extraordinary age, and he wasn’t sure he wanted to send them over to some unknown alchemist who might pocket

the aged herbs and concoct using ordinary ones. He did want the pills since his people would start reaching E-grade within a few years at most, and having these would expedite the progress of his forces. But he didn't want to waste this treasure.

Hopefully, he could nurture or get to know a skilled alchemist whom he could trust with his herbs instead of sending them out through the Mercantile System. Meanwhile, they could start growing the four herbs on the island.

Since he had decided what to do with the herbs, he took out the next treasure. It was a pity the cauldron wasn't anything special, but it would make a nice gift for the first proper alchemist his force nurtured. Next, the huge metal ball that Zac had found on his first summit appeared, and he put it down on the ground with a heavy thump.

"A Spiritual Ship," Calrin said with interest. "Lowest grade, but it should still be worth quite a bit."

"What? This thing?" Zac asked with surprise.

A Spiritual Ship had been something he had wanted ever since he'd learned about their existence from Ogras. That was why he wanted to upgrade the shipyard so badly. Unfortunately, when he had asked Rahm about it, he had simply tabled the matter until Zac had evolved.

Unfortunately, it would take the Sky Gnomes some time to figure out how to activate it from its current compressed state, so Zac would have to curb his enthusiasm and postpone any joyrides. Instead, they kept going through the immense wealth in Zac's pouch with rapid speed, and they hadn't even gone through a tenth after an hour.

But Zac suddenly stopped and opened up a menu with a frown.

"What's wrong?" Calrin asked.

"A new teleporter just became public," Zac said with surprise.

"A public teleporter? With all the things that are happening on this planet?" Calrin muttered. "Are they suicidal?"

"Or desperate," Zac ventured. "The place is called Everwood Refuge, and it's not a place I have heard of before."

"Are you going?" Calrin asked.

Zac hesitated for a few seconds before he shook his head.

"Not at the moment. The situation is unclear, and I have so many things on my plate as it is," Zac said, and resumed taking out treasure after treasure.

But it only took fifteen minutes until they were once again interrupted, this time by Kenzie jogging over to his courtyard. Zac had already erected

multiple layers of arrays to hide the things inside, so she was forced to wave her arms to get his attention.

Zac started walking toward her, but after a brief hesitation, ran back and put all the treasures into one of his Cosmos Sacks first. He wasn't exactly confident in leaving so much wealth in front of five Sky Gnomes. They might turn crazy from greed and do something stupid, and he didn't want any trouble with their cooperation.

"What's going on?" Zac said after he exited the shield.

"We have visitors," Kenzie said, "from Westfort."

"Thea's people?" Zac said with surprise. "What do they want?"

He hadn't expected someone to come over already, though it was technically possible for his trusted allies to come at any time. They had already agreed that he would come to Westfort in two days to take back his batch of treasures and also peruse the library.

"Yes, they are requesting assistance. Apparently, a town is being attacked by an incursion, and the Marshalls have some sort of agreement with them," she explained.

"Tell Ogras and Joanna. I will meet this man at the teleporter," Zac said as he returned inside the arrays.

"We will have to take a break for now," Zac said, much to the disappointment of the Sky Gnomes. "A settlement is under attack from an incursion. I will go check things out."

"Of course." Calrin nodded. "But before you go, I would like to request some bodyguards for my men. I want to immediately send representatives to the new towns in our network."

"Right now?" Zac said with a frown. "We have a lot of things to do."

"The subject wasn't brought up at the meeting, but we are currently sitting on a mountain of unused gear crafted from the beast waves. From what I gather, this world is heading for its final battles that will decide whether you will break free from the invaders or become yet another conquered baby world," Calrin started.

"This is the optimal opportunity to make some money. But it will also help strengthen you humans while simultaneously bolstering the somewhat marred image of Port Atwood," Calrin said.

"Fine. Take ten demons and ten Valkyries." Zac nodded before he disappeared.

Just a minute later, he arrived at the teleporter, seeing a middle-aged man

curiously looking around. But the moment he saw Zac approach, his eyes widened a bit and he straightened his back.

“I assume you’re the representative from Westfort?” Zac asked as he appeared in front of him.

“It’s an honor, Lord Atwood,” the man said with a bow. “I am Roland Marshall, and I will be the ambassador of Westfort, with your blessing, of course.”

“Nice to meet you,” Zac simply said with a nod.

“I was planning on introducing myself at your arrival in two days, but time waits for no man. You should have no doubt seen the new public town on the teleportation list. It is one of the major Ishiate towns, and they are currently being besieged by their neighboring incursion,” Roland explained.

“The Marshall forces are currently preparing, but rearranging our forces will take some time,” the ambassador continued after checking his watch. “We sent a few scouts through the teleporter first, and there were no signs of either Dominators or Salvation as of eight minutes ago.”

Zac nodded, understanding the man’s implication. The town would perhaps fall before the Marshall Clan could muster its forces.

“I will join as well. I planned to settle a few matters before attacking the incursions, but I guess we can’t wait for this one,” Zac said. “Is Thea coming as well?”

“Exactly, time is of the essence,” Roland said with a nod. “Unfortunately, my niece was forced to put out a few fires as soon as she got back, so she will not be joining you. But she will be done with her quests by the time you arrive at Westfort.”

Zac nodded, slightly disappointed. Having a good ally by one’s side drastically increased safety.

“I am heading back for now, but with your permission, I would like to build a small embassy on your island where I and a small staff would handle any matters that require the cooperation of our two forces. I understand you had a very successful relationship with my niece during the hunt, and my wish is for that relationship to turn into a strong bond between our two families,” Roland continued.

Zac frowned a bit at the very ambiguous wording, but he had no interest in trying to correct the man. He could understand if the Marshalls wanted to forge an alliance the old-school way between their two forces. With him and Thea at the helm, there would be no resisting them.

“That’s fine. You can talk with Adran later to settle those types of matters.” He nodded. “He’s the administrator in charge of most city planning.”

“Excellent. It was a pleasure meeting you,” Roland said with another bow before he walked over to the teleporter and was gone with a flash.

Since he had already decided to fight, he was eager to get going, but he still decided to wait for Ogras to have someone to watch his back. And it took less than a minute for him to arrive, and to his surprise, he was accompanied by Calrin, who was completely decked in defensive gear.

“Strike while the iron is hot,” the gnome simply muttered as an explanation to Zac’s questioning glance.

“Fine, let’s go. Some incursion is attacking, but it shouldn’t be one of the top-grade ones. We’ll keep them at bay until reinforcements arrive. And, Ogras... don’t steal the boss kill this time, okay?” Zac said as he threw a glance at the demon.

“Oh, heard about that one, did you?” Ogras said with a smile.

“I did. Billy was very upset. But I promised you would personally go there and apologize and bring a gift,” Zac said, drawing a disbelieving look from the demon.

RIVERLEAF

Riverleaf sighed as she looked at the ravaged forest outside their town. The trees that their ancestors had tended for hundreds of years were gone, replaced with burnt-out husks, and the farms were turned into ruins and war trenches. As the shaman of their village, she sensed the pain of nature around them.

They had truly underestimated these foreign invaders. For months, they had been battling for territory, neither side showing a clear advantage. The invaders might have been the strongest force in the area, but they were surrounded by over a dozen towns who worked together to keep them at bay. But something had changed a week ago.

In just a day, five towns were destroyed, their populations killed to the last man apart from the lucky few who managed to escape in time. Even the elderly and the children weren't spared, and their scouts had recounted scenes straight out of a nightmare. From there, those black golems had started their crusade, destroying one town after another. The invaders had clearly been holding back until now.

She couldn't help but wonder if there were traitors among them, as implausible as it might seem. Did the invaders know that their top hunters were unavailable or dead due to the hunt? They had worked so hard to maintain a mirage of normalcy, risking their lives to keep the pressure on the incursions. But it was all for naught as they went into a rampage while their strongest warriors were occupied with the hunt.

Everwood Refuge was only still standing because the invaders had started in the other direction, methodically working their way from city to city. Her first instinct had been to flee, but she knew that they couldn't do that. The

beasts around were much too dangerous. Besides, if they fled, they would give up their ancestral homes.

Using the teleporter wasn't a real option either, not to their force at least. It was just much too expensive to send someone through that miraculous gate. Even if her husband had returned with enormous gains, it was far from enough for the whole city. They could afford to teleport a few hundred at the most, only a fraction of the two hundred thousand who lived in their town. They couldn't even afford to send all the children to safety.

Her eyes turned to her husband desperately fighting against the rockmen. They were beyond sturdy. Not even the chief of the hunt managed to quickly kill those things in a one-on-one battle, which was a clear indicator of how the rest of the soldiers fared. Worse yet, they couldn't even use their fortifications to their advantage. The rockmen had made quick work of their protective shield and rampart with their huge boulders, and in less than twenty minutes, it was gone.

The moment they saw that their shield wouldn't hold, they had made their teleporter public in a desperate bid to enlist some help against their threat. She had been elated to see people come through their gate earlier, but most had quickly disappeared again after learning of the situation.

Only a few remained, though it was clear that they were mostly interested in fishing in the muddy waters. She had even been forced to send some soldiers to prevent looting by unscrupulous guests. But suddenly, she saw one of the young hunters-in-training speed toward her with elation in his eyes. Riverleaf had stationed him by the teleporter so that he could keep an eye out for any reinforcements.

"The humans have sent reinforcements!" the youth said between pants.

"They have?" Riverleaf exclaimed, some hope finally rekindling in her heart. "How many?"

Little Leaf scratched his chin in hesitation before he muttered, "Three people came," with an almost inaudible voice. "But one is a child, it seems?"

"So two warriors." Riverleaf sighed in disappointment, realizing it was just more opportunists.

She knew that she couldn't hope for too much. That large human organization had already indicated that they were overwhelmed with similar threats, and they had gotten similar responses from their Ishiate allies. But honestly, she knew that most simply did not wish to risk their lives for no reward.

“Yes, only two... but they are *strong*,” he added with wide eyes.

Riverleaf was about to respond when her heart suddenly thumped, and she looked over in the distance with alarm. Two men and a blue child approached, and Riverleaf immediately understood that these people were the trio that Little Leaf had mentioned. Her second sight screamed in alarm at their approach, telling her that this party could level Everwood Refuge without much trouble.

While there were three of them, her eyes turned toward the human in the middle, as though he was the only one there. He had short hair the color of sand, and he wore an opulent golden robe that made her think of her brethren who gave up their connection to amass material wealth.

In his hand was a ruthless axe that made her almost flinch as she imagined an ocean of blood for some reason. She knew that it was an omen from her shamanic powers, but she couldn't guess its meaning. The axe felt primal, like something their hunters would fashion out of the bones of a great beast. It was an odd choice of weapon for someone dressed in something so fine; the man was a contradiction of refinement and carnage.

She knew that her gifts could be noticed by some people since their world changed, but her instincts made her activate her skill that the System had named [**Minor Prophetic Vision**]. She wanted to get a glimpse of whether these people were their saviors, but a soul-rending pain erupted in her mind, only allowing her a glimpse before her sight turned black.

The silver-haired man was shrouded in darkness, a black hand dragging him into an abyss of despair. The vision was extremely taxing, but it was nothing compared to the man in the golden robes. She was assaulted by tens of visions she couldn't make sense of, completely obscuring his future. She only managed to see a glimpse of his past instead.

The man stood with his axe, accompanied by a monstrous beast in a sea of blood, a storm of vengeful spirits clamoring in hatred and despair. Just how many had he killed to form such a following of the dead? In another vision, he was bound by innumerable chains, fettered by both love and hate as he pushed through a battlefield.

But while he seemed to be an apostle of death, he was also the bringer of life. A golden halo rose behind him, and it formed an equal and opposing force to the hurricane of the fallen.

Refinement and carnage; life and death.

She had no time to make sense of the visions, as it felt like she was about

to die, and blood flowed out of her nose and ears. She had overtaxed her soul for that brief glimpse. Her body was unable to withstand the prophetic weight of the man in front of her. Perhaps not even the Grand Shaman would be able to endure a peek into this man's future.

The party seemed to move leisurely, but they quickly closed the distance between the teleporter and the rampart she stood on, and as they came closer, primal flight responses were screaming in Riverleaf's mind. But she forced herself to stand still, gazing at their approach with her normal vision. Their steps echoed like the drums of war in her mind, and it felt like their forms towered to the sky.

The trio suddenly disappeared in a shroud of darkness before they appeared right in front of her on top of the rampart. She made sure not to use her shamanic powers, which had been a natural part of her since childhood. Using her gifts in this close proximity would likely fry her brain, turning her into a simpleton. The two adults calmly overlooked the losing battle out in the field after glancing at her.

As they were closer, she got a better look at the two. It was obvious that the man with the shadow hand was neither human nor Ishiate, but rather something she had never encountered before. He had large horns in his forehead that looked like frozen fire, and his skin had a reddish tinge.

She was curious about his heritage, but she didn't dare to ask. In truth, she didn't even dare to speak up. The duo had obviously masked their power, but she knew the truth about this small group from her shamanic vision. They could not be insulted or angered, since they were drenched in blood.

"It's these bastards?" the horned man said with surprise as he looked at the army. "Well, that's just fine."

The man in the golden robes turned toward Riverleaf and nodded in greeting. She didn't trust her voice at the moment, so she could only bow in response, holding her hands nervously in front of her.

"I am Zac. You should call back your warriors. We can take it from here," he said with a calm voice, his eyes not even showing a ripple after witnessing the huge army of golems that were steadily ripping through their line of defenses.

"But..." she hesitantly said, but she had no chance to continue as they disappeared just like they'd appeared.

The next moment, she sensed a monstrous power from the battlefield, and she looked over with worry, afraid that their enemies had launched a renewed

assault.

Her eyes were immediately drawn toward an enormous hand hovering in the air. The hand had appeared out of nowhere, and it radiated an earthshattering might. It clearly was made of wood and made her think of the Treefather from the legends. Had the old gods returned to save them from their plight? The hand flew toward the army with terrifying speed, and the golems scrambled to erect defenses.

But it was for naught as the hand slammed into the ground with enough force to almost throw her off the rampart. The earth shook, and large cracks in the ground quickly spread from the impact. Over a hundred of the golems that had caused them so much trouble were utterly destroyed in an instant, and twice as many were lying on the ground with serious wounds.

Then the whole battlefield was shrouded in darkness. It was as though the darkness was alive, and it twisted and changed shapes. Spears grew out from nowhere; the golems were getting impaled by the dozens. It soon looked like a forest with trees wrought from shadows had grown in front of their city, and each tree held a dead or dying invader.

Two familiar silhouettes made themselves known in the middle of the battlefield, and they rushed forward with wild abandon. Riverleaf wanted to shout a warning, but her voice got stuck in her throat when they unleashed mindboggling carnage upon the golems.

“Young miss, there’s no need to worry. Those two will neutralize the calamity that has befallen your fair city. Better yet, I will turn calamity into opportunity,” a refined voice from next to her spoke up, making Riverleaf look over with surprise.

It was the blue child who had spoken to her. She had completely forgotten about him due to the shocking presence of the other two, but he had clearly stayed behind as those two had unleashed their attacks on the invaders. She prepared to placate the child, but at a second glance, she realized it was no child who had spoken with her. It was rather a man from yet another unknown race.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance,” the small blue being said with a bow. “I am Calrin Thayer, and I would like to provide you with the opportunity of a lifetime.”

ROCKMEN

Zac surveyed the battlefield as the Ishiate warriors were walking through it, making sure that all the golems were dead as they lay on the scorched ground. Of course, most of the time, there was no need to check, since the bodies were separated into pieces or completely destroyed from his onslaught. Ogras stood not far from him, holding his hand around the mold where his other arm once was.

“You’ve gained a lot of power during your hunt,” Ogras commented from the side. “And your aura is far denser. It bodes well for our trip to the Towers, especially now that we need to get the protection of some larger force. Go high enough and they might not even care that you’re not a cultivator.”

“I could say the same to you. You shouldn’t have gained any levels since we fought these things last time, yet you are a lot stronger. Care to explain how?” Zac responded as he threw a glance over at the demon.

“Well, we all have our means,” the demon said with a noncommittal shrug.

“You have somehow broken your restrictions, haven’t you?” Zac said, keeping his eyes on Ogras’ face for any changes.

“Sharp as a tack, this one,” Ogras said with a snort. “Yes, I got a quest that I managed to complete. So I am no longer bound by the restrictions that afflicted me. However, it still applies to my soldiers. They will have to wait it out or find their own means to release their full potential.”

Zac slowly nodded. He had already guessed as much from the moment they started fighting. The shadow spears of Ogras had been almost too many to count as he ripped through the rockman army. The demon was clearly a lot

stronger compared to before. The difference in strength between the two had widened compared to before the hunt, but Ogras had still exploded with surprising power, going by his somewhat limited opportunities.

Ogras hadn't mentioned it, but Zac also guessed that the demon's Dao had also progressed since he'd last seen the demon fight as well, since the aura it emitted was quite intense. The presence of the so-called Origin Dao that Brazla explained during the meeting was likely the source of the demon's improvement.

It gave Zac a better understanding of why so many forces wanted to risk their lives to invade newly integrated planets. The Origin Dao could save people decades of meditation, or even award Dao Seeds to people who were completely hopeless in that regard.

Of course, Zac didn't feel threatened by the demon's advancements. Ogras had improved surprisingly much, but it was far less compared to his own gains. Ogras had killed less than half as many rockmen compared to Zac, but he had a slew of Progenitor titles and a second class to bolster his power. If a normal scion of a relatively weak clan could output this much pressure, it made him wonder just how strong cultivators from higher-tier planets were.

Besides, Zac had yet to gain the ultimate skills for his two classes. Normally, you got two final skills at level 75, each giving you a great boost. So Zac still had a lot of room to grow while at F-grade, whereas any improvement for Ogras should be quite arduous by now.

"So what do you want to do now?" Ogras finally asked, perhaps to avoid any further questioning about his increased power. "Keep going or head back?"

It was a good question. They had killed a lot of the rockmen, but there were no elites in the group. The leader of the rockmen back when Port Atwood was invaded had been noticeably stronger than anyone in this punitive army, meaning that they hadn't sent the true aces of the incursions to clear out these neighboring towns.

They already knew that those three incursions that spawned simultaneously outside his town didn't send the real leaders, but rather a second-in-command. That meant that the big boss of the rockmen should still be alive. Furthermore, the restrictive shackles should have lessened even further by now.

According to the information he had gathered, the restrictions usually

lasted between six to twelve months, and it differed depending on how high-graded the planet was. The higher grade of the newly integrated planet, the quicker the restrictions would be lifted so that the trial for the natives was tough enough.

Since Earth had become a D-grade planet right off the bat, the restrictions should be on the shorter side of the spectrum. Unfortunately, Zac had no idea exactly when it would happen, which was why he wanted to attack the incursions as quickly as possible. He wanted to fight the invaders before they gained another power-up.

Zac opened his mouth to answer, but before he had the chance to speak, the sounds of hurried footsteps interrupted him. They both turned around to see a male Ishiate walk over, accompanied by the woman they had spoken to up at the wooden rampart.

Zac already knew that he was the Lord, or rather, leader of the hunt, of this town, and his wife was something like a druid or nature priestess. What surprised Zac, though, was that he saw the Ishiate wearing a fitted armor set made out of chitin shells that were clearly from the Ayn ants.

Calrin had really worked quickly.

“Lord Atwood, Lord Azh’Rezak,” the Ishiate said with a bow, “I am Steelwood. My family and Everwood Refuge is ever in your debt. If there is anything we can do in return, please let us know.”

“I see you’re wearing the local products of Port Atwood,” Zac answered with a smile. “Allowing the opening of a branch of the Thayer Consortium is all we ask in return.”

“We would also be grateful if you helped us make some inroads with your Ishiate allies,” Ogras quickly added. “You have seen the strength of our gear, and our supply is huge. Allowing us to open more stores would save a lot of lives and allow you to grow stronger more quickly.”

The two Ishiate gave each other a quick glance, but they soon nodded.

“What you say is true. The items the blue one showed us were far superior to the items we brought from our old world, though they were a bit expensive. But one cannot put a price on life. We will speak with our allies about your trading venture,” Steelwood said. “Though you should know that the Ishiate hero Starlight does also control a business.”

A burst of killing intent seeped out of Ogras, but he quickly quenched it after a glare from Zac. The fact that Starlight had somehow gotten his hands on a business venture was both surprising and unfortunate. It would impact

their spread on Earth to a certain degree.

Of course, their main target was the human towns since they were far more numerous than the Ishiate. The beastmen were the second least populous species, only beating out the Molemen in the underworld, and there were at least twenty times more humans on the new planet, based on estimations.

“That is fine; we will not force anyone. Our wares speak for themselves,” Zac said. “More importantly, is your teleporter still public?”

“No,” Steelwood said with a shake of his head. “The moment we saw your combat prowess, I closed it. I learned a bit about those who are called the Dominators during the hunt, and I feared having it open for too long.”

Zac initiated the system to set up an alliance with Steelwood, and he quickly accepted the prompt.

“Please set Port Atwood to trusted. My army is standing by,” Zac said. “Since I am already here, I will close the incursion.”

“It will take at least a day, probably two,” Ogras said from the side, showing a far calmer response to the proclamation compared to the two Ishiate.

Their eyes widened in disbelief, and they mutely stared at Zac until the female spoke up.

“Lord Atwood,” she hesitantly said, “closing the incursion is easier said than done. They have set up a very strong protective array. Our scouts have also found that thousands of large boulders are floating about the core area. We believe they might be a defensive measure as well.”

“Don’t worry,” Zac said, unfazed. “If you want, you can join us, but if you want to stay behind, it’s fine as well.”

Steelwood slowly nodded his head.

“I will accompany you. I’ve raided their incursion many times and know the paths,” he said, placing a hand on his wife’s arm.

Not long after, the Valkyries and the demon army started streaming out of the teleporter, immediately securing the vicinity. When they saw that there was no threat, Joanna quickly walked over to Zac and bowed.

“Lord Atwood,” she said, “we were afraid something had happened when the teleporter closed.”

“Just a safety precaution,” Zac said. “You guys haven’t slacked off.”

It was true. His eyes couldn’t help widening in surprise as he glanced over the Valkyries with **[Inquisitive Eye]**. All of them were past level 35,

and many were even in the early 40s. Joanna was the strongest, having reached level 44.

It was far from enough to reach the ladder after the hunt, but it was extremely impressive considering how far behind they had been when he picked them up.

“It is thanks to the resources and hunting grounds you provide.” Joanna nodded. “After we got strong enough to venture into the forests alone, our leveling speed exploded. The barghest have grown in numbers, and it’s almost impossible for us to run out of things to kill.”

“That’s true. However, shouldn’t your gain be a bit limited now when you’ve passed level 40?” Zac asked.

“Some of us are also hunting in squads on Mystic Island. We can only hunt in the outer rim, though, where the beasts are only around level 60. But it gives far more Cosmic Energy, and the battle experience is valuable as well,” Joanna agreed.

“Keep up the good work. The incursion here is those rockmen who invaded us before. The Valkyries will join us, but be careful. These ones are pretty tough,” Zac said.

Joanna seemed to ready to argue, but Zac held up his hand.

“I have a gift for the Valkyries. During the hunt, I got my hands on a few War Arrays. After you’ve learned those, you will be a truly elite force. But until then, you still need to be careful,” he said.

“You finally got one?” she said with excitement.

“I also have another gift for you,” Zac said as he took out Nenotheop’s spear. “This thing belonged to a crazy-strong guy in the hunt, and it should be a real Spirit Tool. You were the first Valkyrie to join me, and your level is proof of your effort. I hope it will help you keep pushing forward.”

Joanna mutely stared at the spear that Zac placed in her hand with wide eyes, looking completely frozen. Zac smiled at her before he turned toward Ilvere, who was leading the demon army.

“We set out immediately. You’ll stay in charge of the two armies,” Zac said.

“No problem. I was getting bored from sitting around on the island,” the large demon said as he cracked his neck with some excitement glimmering in his eyes. “These girls need some experience as well. A real warrior is not born by fighting some dumb animals.”

Zac briefly considered waiting for the Marshall Clan to catch up, but in

the end, he decided against it. Closing an incursion gave a huge boost in power and wealth, and he wanted that boost to stay within his force.

Calrin had no desire to head to the incursion since there were no profits for him to be made there, so he headed back to Port Atwood. Zac asked him to try to get his hands on language crystals that could help him read the scripts of the Undead Empire.

His language skill did not work on written texts, but it wasn't hard to learn to read with the help of crystals. The good ones worked just like a skill crystal and imprinted the knowledge without the need of arduous cramming sessions.

Everything was settled, and they left Everwood Refuge with Steelwood leading the way. In just ten minutes, his army was speeding through the forests, heading in the direction of a group of mountains in the distance. The rockmen had, not surprisingly, chosen a mountain as their stronghold.

It was a pain in the ass since it would give them a topological advantage, but Zac wasn't overly worried. Everything he knew about this invasion was that they weren't from too strong a force. The leader of their invasion force was nowhere as strong as the Corpselord, and they were essentially used as cannon fodder by the two stronger forces.

But while he wasn't worried for himself, he did worry for his soldiers. He had seen the carnage from a large-scale battle just a few days ago. The casualties had been staggering on both the sides of Berum and Medhin, and that was even though they were the elites of their respective worlds.

It took them six hours to reach their destination, allowing Zac and Ogras to restore their reserves of energy. But even then, they stopped to make sure everyone was in peak condition before they started the fight. Due to the great vantage of the rockman base, a surprise blitz was already not an option, so they needed to fight the invaders head-on.

A large fort stood erect in the distance, with a gray shield enveloping it. Above the wall walk, hundreds of large boulders floated, likely ready to be launched at any incoming force. It reminded Zac of what Ogras had told him a long time ago. Attacking a town was suicide unless you possessed superior force.

"I wish that brute were here now," Ogras muttered as he looked at the shield and the fortress in the distance.

Zac agreed that it would be nice to have Billy here. But he couldn't always throw Billy to the front, risking his life to gain easier access. He knew

that he would have to be the one to take the lead this time. Soon they stood just a kilometer away from the rockmen's shield, and the wall was filled with black stoic shapes.

"I'll try to break open the shield. Can you help destroy as many of the stones as possible?" Zac said to Ogras.

"No problem," Ogras said with a shrug.

CORPSEBLOOM MANTRA

Zac panted as he popped a healing pill while looking at the surroundings. The large fortress largely lay in ruins, and much of it was his own handiwork. The battle between himself and the incursion leader had caused widespread destruction, especially due to the stone-thaumaturgy of the rockman.

He bent over and snatched the Cosmos Sack of his opponent, but he didn't join the efforts to drive the remaining rockmen toward their Nexus Hub. This time, there were no quests rewarded or titles, just pure battle between two forces. The blitz of himself and Ogras had broken the defensive perimeter in a furious assault, and in just seconds, a large part of the elite defenders was dead or dying from either his fractal blades or innumerable stabs of shadowy spears.

When the defensive line was broken, Ilvere had commanded the demons and the Valkyries forward, and Zac was shocked by their improvement. Of course, Ilvere was doing the work of ten men, though most of his efforts were spent on making sure his soldiers stayed alive.

Any time a skirmish seemed to go awry, his huge metal ball flew over with the force of a truck, instantly swinging the battle in their favor. There were a few strong rockmen who had tried to do the same, but they were met by insidious attacks from Ogras.

As for the leader, Zac took care of him. He had been quite powerful, but Zac got the sense that even Ogras would have been able to defeat him in a one-on-one. Then again, the demon fought without any restrictions, while the power of the incursion leader was still limited by the System's restrictions. But Ogras kept showing new cards, and even Ilvere seemed surprised by the power of Ogras.

Zac finally learned what hid beneath that mold on his stump. It was like he had crammed in thousands of shadows and forced them into the shape of his missing arm. But the arm was also able to change shape according to his will. It was very strong, but it was also clear that Ogras lacked proper control of it, and it started to fall apart after a short while in the open.

Zac hadn't even needed to go all out in his battle, and he was in much better condition after this fight compared to after his battle with Nenotheop. But unfortunately, the battle didn't give him a level, and he realized that he would need to fight quite a few people to reach the two final levels before he reached his bottleneck. He had gained the past eight levels thanks to the rewards of the hunt, and the amount of energy that was required to reach level 74 shocked him.

The moment he killed the rockman leader, the rest of the soldiers immediately initiated an organized retreat through their Nexus Hub. The hub was located inside the battle, and the support staff of their incursion immediately entered while the soldiers kept Zac's forces at bay.

Of course, he didn't push the matter. There was no way for them to kill all of the rockmen before they managed to flee, so their force definitely would get a report of what had transpired here. There was no need to go on a widespread rampage at this juncture, causing unnecessary enmities in the Multiverse.

For the rockmen, this was likely just business. They wanted access to resources and Origin Dao, and they were willing to risk their lives for it. That they would be ousted was always a real risk, and no one would waste their resources on finding Earth again. But it might be different if Zac caused a vendetta with them.

So the soldiers were mostly pushing the forces toward the Nexus Hub, killing anyone who tried to act out. In just fifteen minutes, no living rockmen were remaining in the fortress, at least not that they could find.

Interestingly enough, the moment the last rockman disappeared, Zac got a prompt from the system.

[Annex RCKV-4433?]

Zac hesitated a bit about what to do before he agreed.

[Appoint Mayor?]

Zac frowned a bit before he hurried over to Ogras, who looked a bit pale as he cradled the form that contained his weird shadow hand.

“You okay?” Zac asked as he looked down at the slightly pale demon.

“Just field-testing. It drains more energy than I expected. What’s wrong?”

“I annexed this place. Can I elect a mayor at a later time?” Zac asked.

“Not sure, but I don’t see why not?” Ogras muttered with some uncertainty. “What do you want with this shithole?”

“It’s time to build a presence on the main continent. It’s good to have alternatives if our efforts at the coast don’t work out,” Zac said.

“Fair enough. It would be nice not to have to rely on some random strangers to move about the continent. Besides, Nexus Hubs are strategic resources that are worth a lot,” the demon agreed.

Zac nodded and opened the Town Shop. Most of the options he had available at his main town were available here as well, though it was clear that his population in Port Atwood did not count here toward structures that had building restrictions.

He quickly bought a new defensive array and a teleportation array, creating a defensible position for his soldiers.

“We’ll leave a few people here until Adran can send someone over to sort things out,” Zac said.

“I think the golems chose this place for a reason. Perhaps there are good things in the mountain,” Ogras said as he looked over at the towering peaks right behind the fortress where they’d fought.

Zac nodded as he stepped through the teleporter, arriving back at Port Atwood. He didn’t have time to make the arrangements for the new outpost, and he left that for others to figure out. Instead, he headed over to the Thayer Consortium, and in minutes, the Sky Gnomes were back at his courtyard, full of energy.

“Your language crystals,” Calrin said and handed over a box. “The Undead Empire has five official languages. I could not get all of them, though. The fifth one is apparently only used by the higher-ups, and it’s not for sale.”

Zac nodded in thanks as he opened the box. Four black crystals lay inside, each one with a different insignia engraved. Zac picked up the first one and placed it against his head, and it was instantly filled with a burst of

information. The transfer continued for a few minutes until the crystal finally cracked and turned to black dust.

The crystals were unfortunately onetime use, but that made them much cheaper than the type of crystals that could be used repeatedly after allowing them to restore their energies. Zac was a bit woozy from the mental shock, but he kept going, and soon he had absorbed the information of all four languages.

He knew he was pushing it by doing so. Absorbing this much knowledge with his very limited Intelligence could hurt his brain, but he didn't have time to let his mind rest. He quickly turned back to the gnomes, who eagerly looked at his Cosmos Sack, and once again started to go through his treasures.

As they worked, Abby also came by, updating Zac on the tasks he had given out. The renovation of the area around the Towers of Myriad Dao was underway, and over a hundred people were working at it to get it done in record speed. They had also teleported over hundreds of Zhix workers to dig as far down as possible in their mines. Since they lived underground, they were natural diggers.

"Regarding the Zhix, Nonet wants to speak with you at your convenience," Abby said.

"And I guess Nonet still does not want to leave their hive?" Zac asked, to which Abby simply bobbed in confirmation.

"I will try to make it, but honestly, there's a bit much on my plate at the moment." Zac sighed.

"I think it's in regard to the Dominators, but I cannot be sure," Abby ventured.

"I'll try to speed things up. Can you call over my sister?" Zac asked.

Soon Kenzie ran over and took over the job of managing the five Sky Gnomes. In a perfect world, he wouldn't need to waste his sister's time for this. But he had caught every single Sky Gnome trying to pilfer a few goodies for themselves multiple times. The ancient one had especially sticky fingers, making him not a small source of exasperation.

So instead, Zac released a small hill of treasure at the time and had Kenzie watch over the proceedings as he started looking through the things that he had found in Mhal's Cosmos Sack. The first things he took out were information missives similar to the one he'd gotten from Ogras, though they seemed to be created by some intelligence faction in the Undead Empire.

They were quite exhaustive, and Zac learned about quite a few forces that he hadn't heard about before. There was even a pretty decent rundown of the Allbright Empire, the place where Average and Greatest resided. It was a strong C-grade force that consisted of seven sectors, one of which was the Emyrean Sector. The Red Sector that Greatest had mentioned was ranked in the middle, and it was run by middle-tier C-grade Monarchs.

It was very valuable information since it gave him a pretty good gauge of the power level of not only Greatest but also the Great Redeemer. Everything pointed toward Greatest being in the top tier of the Red Zone, though not necessarily at the peak. That meant he was likely at the bottleneck of the D-grade.

That also meant the Great Redeemer might be around that power level as well since he seemed to be pretty close in power from the aura he'd released. It didn't really change things, since he had no way to defeat that man no matter whether he was D-grade or C-grade, but finding protection against a Peak D-grade Hegemon should be far easier than from a C-grade Monarch.

Of course, that was all conjecture. Zac also learned the shocking reality of the Church of Everlasting Dao. Who would have thought that the zealous cult was just a front for a large corporation that collected bodies and sold them to people running out of their life span?

It made Zac remember what the Great Redeemer had said when he asked if he was part of the Church. He had called them body peddlers and that their path toward immortality was a dead end. Zac was shocked that it was even possible to transfer to a new body to prolong one's life, but he had a feeling there were severe limitations to such a thing.

Apparently, the Undead Empire and the cult were at constant war since they fought over the high-grade corpses wherever they met.

Apart from the information on the Church and the Allbright Empire, thousands of other forces were listed, which was too much for Zac to go through at the moment. He placed the information crystals to the side, and he'd hand them over to someone else who could go through it all in case there was anything of importance.

The second thing he took out was the cultivation manual that Mhal's clan used. It was called [**Corpsebloom Mantra**], and it said that it could boost compatible attacks up to 22% at E-grade, and it was possible to use all the way to level 150 provided the cultivator's body was proficient enough.

Zac hadn't looked too much into cultivation since he'd found out that he

was a mortal, but he knew that 22% wasn't a bad percentage. Ogras had once said that a boost of 10% per grade up to D-grade was good, but after that, he wasn't sure.

That was also why he hadn't seen cultivators as a real threat so far. Even those with good manuals were only boosted to a pretty limited degree, but that would change in E-grade. Twenty to thirty percent was completely possible, which was like a permanent boost of **[Hatchetman's Rage]** without any downsides.

Besides, those numbers came from Ogras, whose origin was a pretty weak D-grade clan, so it wasn't impossible that the manuals from higher-tiered forces were even better. But that wasn't really what was on Zac's mind as he thoughtfully looked down at the manual.

He had already resigned himself to being a mortal until he could get his hands on one of those treasures that would enable cultivation, or reaching a high enough grade. But he hadn't considered one aspect. He now had two races, which was essentially like having two different bodies.

Was the second body truly unable to cultivate as well?

GUARANTEE DEATH

Zac's heartbeat sped up in anticipation, and he almost wanted to smack himself when he realized he had forgotten about checking his cultivation talent in his Draugr form. It felt especially likely now that he learned that the Draugr was a royal group that had extra good control over Miasma compared to other undead species.

But he forcibly put away the manual again and refocused on his real task. It was not like he could try it out at the moment in any case, since he was currently in his human form. Instead, he kept looking through the documents and crystals that were written in the script of the Undead Empire.

A welcome find was that one of the crystals was actually a skill crystal that taught a Miasma-based attack. It was unfortunate, but the skills in the repository were unusable in his Draugr form since Miasma and Cosmic Energy weren't interchangeable.

So the large treasure trove of skills that he possessed was completely useless for his undead form unless there were some undead skills on the higher tiers that he still didn't have access to. That was also why he had been forced to enter the hunt without an offensive skill to complement his Undying Bulwark class.

Unfortunately, it wasn't the skill that the Corpselord used where he summoned two fearsome miasmatic beasts, but rather something that seemed a bit more mundane. The skill was called **[Unholy Strike]**, and it was a simple skill that allowed one to force a large amount of Miasma into your arms to unleash a mighty strike.

It could either be used on its own to empower one's strike or in conjunction with another skill. For example, he could use it to strike harder

with **[Verun's Bite]** against sturdy enemies. It wouldn't help much against hordes of beasts, but it would actually be even better than **[Chop]** against stronger foes. Furthermore, if he had been able to use **[Chop]** in his undead form, he would have been able to empower it with **[Unholy Strike]** for a combined attack.

Zac remembered that Mhal had used it in conjunction with his bone scythe, and the effect had been pretty good. It was a skill that got stronger from physical attributes as well, and it even mentioned that the better the constitution one had, the more Miasma one could push into the arms.

And if there was something that he excelled at in his Draugr form, it was Endurance. Zac quickly put the skill together with the cultivation manual, and he started to become eager to swap to his undead form to test his new gains.

But he pushed on through Mhal's notes, and finally, his eyes turned to a ragged journal bound in some black leather. He had seen it before lying together with piles of other crystals and books, but he hadn't checked it out before after learning that all the documents in the Corpse-lord's possession were in illegible scripts. He took it out of his sack and looked over it briefly before he made to open it.

"Wait!" someone suddenly shouted, and Zac stopped himself with a start.

It was the old thief-turned-appraiser, who looked over in his direction with alarm.

"What's the matter?" Zac asked with some confusion.

"Do not open that," Gemidir quickly said as he hurried over. "It has tampering protections in place. If you open it, you will destroy the contents."

"What?" Zac exclaimed with shock as he quickly moved his hand away from it.

"It's a common protection in case your things get stolen. Sometimes it's not the treasures that hold the value of a snatched bag, it's the information," the old man said as he nimbly gripped the book. "And when there are protections, there are solutions."

Suddenly, a small white rat popped out from nowhere on top of the old man's hand, and Zac realized it was likely a skill since the mouse was covered in small fractals. But it was extremely lifelike, making Zac believe that the old man might actually be in the E-grade even though he gave off a very feeble vibe.

But suddenly, both the old man and the mouse froze, and both glanced over at Zac with an odd look.

“What’s wrong? Can’t you open it?” Zac asked with some urgency.

“This old man can’t be sure,” the elderly Sky Gnome said with an exaggerated sigh. “As you know, our family has hit hard times lately. My house has been repaired, but the wind goes right through, freezing me to my bones. My skills aren’t what they used to be due to that.”

“Uh,” Zac said with some confusion, but some realization dawned upon him when Gemidir kept talking.

“Nothing like those fancy houses I’ve seen you humans build. With your insulation and temperature control, with all kinds of miraculous appliances that could improve the living situation of a poor old man.”

“I’ll commission a mansion for you if you can successfully open this thing up without harming the contents,” Zac said with some amusement.

“This old man is honored, but I don’t even have the furniture to fill such an extravagant three-story mansion,” the old man said.

When did I say three-story? Zac thought to himself with some resignation.

“I’ll also provide furniture,” Zac added.

“What abou—”

“Don’t push it,” Zac cut him off. “I am sure there are many others who are willing and able to lift some restrictions.”

“This old man finally realized how to open this thing; rest assured, young man,” Gemidir quickly said, and the next moment, the mouse jumped up onto the cover of the book, sniffing around.

Zac curiously looked on as the small mouse seemed to be looking for something until it indicated a corner at the top of the book to Gemidir. When the old thief got the signal, he channeled some Cosmic Energy into his finger and lightly tapped the spot the mouse found.

The old man gave off the aura of a safecracker as he and his sidekick lifted the restrictions one by one. In total, they found nine spots, at which point Gemidir nodded in affirmation as the mouse disappeared. Zac took the leather-bound book, looking over at the old man with some skepticism.

The book looked exactly the same as before, and Zac honestly couldn’t tell if he had just been scammed out of a mansion or whether the old man had been telling the truth. But it was too late to regret anything now, and Zac felt it was better to be safe than sorry.

If Mhal truly was doing some experiments with Draugr DNA or something similar, it was reasonable that he wanted to keep that secret. Doing

something like that might draw the ire of the noble clans, getting both himself and his clan into trouble.

The old man nodded at him with a smile before he joined the others as they kept going through treasures under Kenzie's direction. He noted that she had placed a few things in a small pile by her side, and he guessed she had found a few things that she needed.

Zac didn't mind if she took some things for herself. Some might see it as nepotism, but he didn't really care. He was the one who found everything, so he decided how things would be distributed. Instead, he focused on the journal in front of him, and just after a few sentences, he was hooked.

Little brother, I am sorry about the secrecy, but some things cannot simply be said out loud. I will explain why I gave you those odd instructions, and I hope that you can create a miracle.

During my travels two hundred years ago, I fell through a spatial crack while I explored a Mystic Realm. I was sure I would perish in the vacuum of space, but instead, I found myself in a tomb with a body encased in Eternal Ice. A Draugr warrior. Just digging him out took me three years.

In his possessions was a journal, and I realized that this man had been entombed in this odd space for billions of years. According to the archaic scripts, I quickly realized that this man came from a time even before the Undying Empire was founded. Can you believe it, an ancestor from the dark era?

He was a lone warrior and had no children or other next of kin, and he had met his demise while traveling to find a way to break through, just like I did. I quickly put the body inside my pouch, and after twenty-four years, I managed to escape through the very same tear that finally reappeared for a brief window.

At first, I was planning to provide the body to the Kavriel Clan in hopes of attaining their favor and perhaps some resources. After all, returning an ancestor of their kin should count for something, right?

But then I had an idea. In my possession, I had a Draugr specimen in prime condition, and more importantly, the body seemed to have no connection to the current lineages. You know how they can crack down on unsanctioned descendants through bloodline arrays, but there shouldn't be any link between this man and the current clans, no?

That's when I got the idea for my experiments. Imagine gaining the superior miasmatic aptitude of the Draugr race while still having the outward

appearance of Corpse Lords? The moment the thought entered my mind, I couldn't let it go.

Unfortunately, it's hard for me to perform such experiments in my current position. There are too many eyes watching my moves since I became patriarch. If I start procuring large numbers of the living and the unevolved to experiment on, I fear I might be exposed.

That's why I spent so much money to give you this chance. Certainly, the chance to bask in the resources of a virgin world is a great opportunity. But the experiments are more important. You are young, but you have always had a clever mind with your manipulation and augmentation of the lower undead. I ask you to use that insight now.

Enclosed are 1,000 small samples from the Draugr body. I hope you can use them to push the research further. I honestly haven't made much progress thus far, and this all might just be a pipe dream. Every subject thus far has failed due to their bodies not being able to withstand rebuilding the core composition.

Get strong test subjects; the longer they survive, the more data you will be able to collect. I wish you the best of luck, little brother, and I hope you will come back with news that can push the two of us to new heights.

And most importantly, remember to never tell anyone about what we're doing. None of us will survive if it gets out.

The following pages were meticulously kept experimentation logs, where the Corpse Lord recounted various trials where he tried to infuse both undead and the living with the "Essence of Draug," as he called it. The results were abysmal.

After a while, the script slightly changed, telling Zac that Mhal had taken over the experiments at that point, whereas the earlier ones had been performed by the elder brother.

The reading was a chilling experience for Zac because it showed just how close to death he had been. Hundreds of Zombies and humans had been caught by Mhal and forcibly imbued with the essence, and not one had survived. The strongest had lasted less than a day before dying a true death.

It was due to this that Mhal had even started mentioning using the essence as a poison rather than a medicine, which brought Zac to a short and succinct note in between two experimentation logs.

Forced to use three stored essence seeds as a weapon in the fight against a particularly strong native to guarantee death. Unfortunately unable to

retrieve the body for study. Over three hundred samples have been used already. I need to portion out my trials from this point forward.

Zac's eyes lingered on the two words "guarantee death" for a full minute as he tried to comprehend what had happened. He had been injected with a large dose of the essence, which should have killed him like all the others. But not only was he fine after a pretty harrowing experience, but he even got a Specialty Core and a second race.

What made him different from the hundreds of others who had died from the injections? The possibility he tried not to think about was getting all the more plausible the more he learned.

Just what had his mother done to him?

FINAL TALLY

The more he thought about it, the likelier it almost felt to Zac. He might not have an AI that guided him in his cultivation, but there had been several times where he was fine when he should have died by all accounts.

The most notable instances were the time he jumped into the pond of Cosmic Water and came out unscathed with an improved race afterward. Next, there was the incident where he killed almost a hundred thousand Zombies and absorbed a huge amount of Miasma.

That incident should have killed him by all accounts, but instead, he'd emerged with the Duplicity Core. There were also various times that almost anyone should have died, but he just passed out due to excessive wounds and woke up a bit later. He was like an unkillable tank, even though it was only just recently his Endurance started to become monstrous.

Had his mother somehow fiddled with his constitution to make his body able to endure when it would normally fail?

Zac quickly shook his head and closed the journal. There was no way for him to find out unless he met his mother again. But at least he knew the root of his undead race, and it seemed he was mostly in the clear. There was some elder brother to Mhal who also knew of the Draugr issue, but there shouldn't be much he could do.

If he was the patriarch of his clan, he should be far stronger compared to the Corpselord he'd fought, and unable to come here in person. Perhaps he would order some people to find him since Zac killed his brother, but he shouldn't know anything about him becoming a Draugr.

Mhal himself had thought Zac dead until the moment they ran into each other, and just a minute later, he was dead. There shouldn't be any loose

ends, and if he ever ran into Draugr in the future, he could just feign ignorance and say he grew up on an unintegrated world or something.

There was the issue of the missing samples, though. According to the notes, there should be hundreds of samples remaining, but he couldn't find anything of the sort in the Corpse-lord's Cosmos Sack. Perhaps he had kept them hidden in a separate spot, which might spell a problem. When he assaulted the undead incursion, he would have to look for them so that there were no loose ends.

The note left from the big brother also made a poignant point about karmic threads. It truly seemed that one needed to be careful when traversing the Multiverse. One couldn't take for granted their actions would go unpunished when doing misdeeds.

"Gemidir," Zac suddenly said as he looked up, drawing the attention of the old Sky Gnome.

"Yes?" he asked when he walked over.

"When you stole things in your youth, weren't you worried about getting tracked down by karmic threads?" Zac asked.

"Stole? This old man remembers no such things," Gemidir started, but changed his tune when Zac's eyes thinned. "Taking treasure is as much knowing which target to hit as taking the right valuables. Find someone who won't be able to find you. Or just steal things that aren't valuable enough for them to expend enough resources to track you down."

"But Karma is truly a bane for most thieves, which is why the higher-tiered ones all try to find ways to obscure the heavens and hide from the karmic eyes," Gemidir added.

Zac's eyes lit up since it felt like he had found another direction that was worth following up on. If they could somehow block the Karmic Link between the Dominators and the Great Redeemer, they might even be able to protect their planet even without fighting those monsters.

And a quick discussion with the Sky Gnomes proved that it was actually possible. However, he was dismayed to find that arrays that could block out Karmic Links were prohibitively expensive, and D-grade arrays at the lowest.

Zac could neither afford them nor even set them up even if he had the money. An adept Array Master, preferably one with insights into Karma, would be needed to make the array work. That was why Calrin hadn't even mentioned the possibility during the meeting.

There were also treasures that had similar effects, though they only

worked on individuals, and not a whole planet like they needed. So it seemed to Zac that he would have to stick with the current plan, at least for the moment.

Since he was done looking through the Corpse-lord's belongings, he returned to Kenzie's side to find the Sky Gnomes all working with sullen expressions.

"What's going on?" Zac asked with confusion.

"Your little sister must have been an Imperial Adjudicator in a past life," the old Sky Gnome said with a hurt look at Kenzie, who only sweetly smiled back at him. "She must have eyes in the back of her head."

"Turns out I'm pretty good at figuring out when they try to sneak some valuables for themselves," Kenzie explained with a smile.

Zac was confused for a second before he realized that her AI might be able to help her out in more ways than one.

"Please help out with the rest as well," Zac said with a smile.

"Fine, but I'm missing a lot of cultivation time. So I'll take a few goodies for myself," Kenzie said.

"No problem. Better yet, I'll show you something good after we're done," Zac agreed.

It was time to take her to his cultivation cave. He needed to check up on his seed in any case. Either the seed should have germinated and stabilized by now, or it would have been absorbed by the pond. In either case, it shouldn't hurt to allow Kenzie to cultivate there by now.

The organization of items took most of the day, and the final tally was shocking to Zac, even though he had been the one to gather everything. Of course, while the wealth that he had accumulated was vast, it was nothing compared to what a D-grade sect should possess.

The simple explanation was that the System had adjusted the treasures just like it likely had adjusted the danger. For example, a Peak E-grade Elder should have thousands of high-grade crystals, but he'd only got his hands on two D-grade crystals.

And while Ogras never had provided a complete explanation about his grandfather's wealth, he knew it was far beyond what he'd gathered the past month. And that was even when he was considered extremely poor for a D-grade powerhouse. But Zac knew he couldn't get greedy, and he had received far more than he had expected.

The pile that Zac would keep for himself was the smallest, but it was also

the most valuable. Its value easily surpassed billions of Nexus Coins, and that was even when there were multiple treasures that even the four Sky Gnomes were unable to figure out the function of.

Zac already knew about some of the treasures since he'd picked them up himself during the first two weeks, but there were a lot of happy surprises as well. Most of them seemed to come from Nenotheop's pouch, but gems were also extracted from the chaotic mess that Zac had snatched from Salvation.

His eyes turned to a neatly stacked pile of jade boxes. Inside them were over a hundred Attribute Fruits. Each of them was only of use at F-grade and worse quality compared to the ones he'd bought in the Contribution Store, but it was a huge gain for Zac, who had only gotten his hands on two of them so far.

The problem with the fruits wasn't their price, but their scarcity. He'd had a standing order for them at Calrin's since the start, but the Sky Gnome was completely unable to get his hands on them. It was truly a mountain of treasure that had fallen into his lap.

The huge pile was also proof that the System adjusted the rewards in the hunt. If he got this many, there should have been at least a thousand Attribute Fruits spread throughout the hunt. It was far more than what a D-grade sect should have lying around. Not that they couldn't afford it, but they would use them on their disciples rather have them lying around.

But what was most curious was that he couldn't even remember picking up these boxes. If he'd known he had Attribute Fruits in his possession, he would have immediately eaten them rather than left them in his bag.

The only explanation that he could come up with was that the System had either added them at the end or made people pick them up but ignore them afterward. Perhaps the System didn't want people who were doomed to die to waste the Attribute Fruits, so it only made them available after the hunt was over.

"A lot of them, but the real prize is these four," Calrin said and pointed at a few more intricate boxes on the side. "Two Luck and two All-Attribute Fruits, one of each mid-grade. Unsurprisingly, the last four are worth as much as the rest combined. If you gobble them all up yourself, you should reach your limit, though you would lose a lot of efficiency that way."

Zac nodded, unable to hide his excitement. The limit the Sky Gnome referred to was the limit of how many attributes this type of treasure could provide. There was no strict limit that the System imposed, but the limit was

generally 15 to 25 in every attribute.

Some of the differences were based on race, where some races could accommodate more bonus points. Humans were completely unremarkable in that regard, so they were on the lower end of the spectrum. But there was also a pretty large component that simply was having good genes.

Being a mortal and not someone possessing special constitutions and bloodlines, Zac suspected that he might be on the lower end of the scale, unless his unusual sturdiness also translated into having a higher ceiling for bonus attributes as well.

Unfortunately, it usually didn't work to eat the same fruit over and over. You usually only ate one of each type since the following ones had reduced effect. Eating the same type over and over was extremely extravagant and something only extremely wealthy scions could afford.

Quite a few of the fruits in the collection were duplicates, so Zac would likely give them to others instead of hoarding them all. He even briefly considered giving all of them to others, apart from the two special fruits. A few bonus attributes might do a lot more good for others than himself.

But in the end, he chose to be a bit greedy. A few points in each attribute might not be a huge boost, but every little bit counted when he was risking his life almost every day. It might allow him to pass the inheritance or reach a higher floor in the Tower of Eternity.

"How do you suggest I should allocate these?" Zac asked of Calrin.

"Take what you need, and then take a decent number for your elite. But you should leave some for the Merit Exchange or the store. People understand that some of them go to the elites, but you need to show that hard work is also rewarded," the Sky Gnome said.

"How do you mean?" Zac asked. "I expect the treasures here will not be leaked to the public."

"We'll keep our word, but no secret stays that way forever, especially if you start handing out treasures to all the elites in Port Atwood. So you need to find a balance. Show the population that hard work will be rewarded and that everyone can become a powerhouse with our help if they struggle enough," Calrin explained.

Zac slowly nodded, as it made some sense. Perhaps it would be optimal to give out all the fruits to the people in his inner circle, but it might sow discontent amongst the army or his craftsmen. It might create the image that working hard was meaningless since the leadership would keep everything

good to themselves.

Zac wanted a culture where people worked hard to improve themselves, and if putting a few Attribute Fruits in the Merit Store helped make that happen, it was worth it. These fruits only gave one to two attributes each, after all, and spread out over ten elites, it wouldn't make all that much difference.

Soon they had split up the Attribute Fruits so that Zac would gain roughly ten points in each attribute, then an even fifty-fifty split amongst the remainder. Zac gave half to Kenzie, who would distribute them amongst the warriors.

Kenzie had spent all her time in the Academy lately, so she had a lot better understanding of who was worth nurturing and who wasn't. Zac himself had been too busy with so many things that he almost only interacted with a small group at the top.

A decent number of them were also earmarked for Emily, whom he still hadn't seen since he got back. He had already invested a Fruit of Ascension to nurture a powerhouse from the ground up, so adding a couple of Attribute Fruits was nothing odd. Zac had asked Kenzie about Emily's situation, but she only told him she was fine.

He was curious about her progress during the past month. Her sixteenth birthday should have taken place roughly two weeks ago, and he wondered if she had gotten her class yet. But when Zac asked his sister about it, she only smiled and said that Emily wanted to tell him about it herself.

BILLIONS

It allowed Zac to relax somewhat about Emily's situation since he could tell it wasn't bad news, going by Kenzie's expression. She was apparently out on a hunting trip at the moment, but she should be back pretty soon. It made Zac worry a bit that she still pushed herself to such a degree, but she was always accompanied by demon guards to keep her somewhat safe.

Apart from the Attribute Fruits, there were also three Dao Treasures, and Zac kept those for himself without any hesitation. He had five seeds to work on now, and he would need every bit of help he could get. Zac only needed to figure out a direction for his seeds before he ate the treasures to increase the likelihood of improving his seeds.

A much larger section of his private stock was filled with high-quality gear that the Sky Gnomes felt had too much value to directly put in the Merit Exchange. They would cost too many points, making it so that no one would be able to exchange for them until the war with the invaders was over.

The most interesting item for Zac was a large glistening shield that radiated weight and ruthlessness. It was a bulwark in the true sense of the word. It was made in black E-grade metals and was roughly 160 centimeters high and a meter wide. The width was almost the same across the whole thing, apart from the top where one end reached a bit higher than the other.

It was also clear it was meant for more than simple defense since five large spikes jutted out from the front, and the bottom also had jagged spikes sticking out like teeth. No matter if he bashed someone or slammed down the lower edge, he would cause gruesome wounds.

Better yet, it came with a skill. And interestingly enough, it wasn't a defensive shield like the one his old robes possessed, but an offensive one.

He could slam the shield down into the ground, which would unleash a barrage of steel spikes at his opponents in front of him. It was a pretty good area attack, and it only needed five minutes to recharge rather than a full day.

It was a great complement to Zac's somewhat disappointing offensive force in his undead form. His thorn aura was an amazing skill, but it took some time to whittle down his enemies. Smarter enemies would also figure out some workarounds after a while, like using defensive tools while attacking to neutralize **[Deathwish]**.

Unfortunately, the shield wasn't a Spirit Tool, but its quality was top E-grade, and it was far sturdier than the shield he'd taken from Thea's bodyguard. It would likely last him quite some time before he needed to swap it out.

The Sky Gnomes had also figured out the workings of the Spirit Vessel. Zac needed to use the elder token that he'd found at the same time as a key. When activated, the large ball changed form into a large floating disk. It looked quite a bit like the array disks that he'd gotten from Ylvas, only a lot larger.

It was about four meters across, so it wouldn't be able to transport a whole army, but it would be able to fly a small strike squad with himself and a handful of others without a problem. Its speed was nothing to scoff at either. According to Calrin, it wasn't anything special, but it was far faster than Zac could run, and over twice as quick as Zac's fastest Creator Vessel.

It even had a defensive shield that both blocked out any wind and weaker attacks. But it wasn't a flying fortress, so using the shield to block out too strong attacks would ruin the disk. Kenzie had put the ball into her own pile, but it was one of the few things he took back for himself.

"You should take this to David and Hannah when you visit them," Kenzie suddenly said as she handed him another disk.

"What's this?" Zac asked as he curiously took the package of array disks.

They looked pretty similar to the array disks that he'd gotten from Ylvas, though the five disks that he held seemed to be meant to be used together.

"They are farming disks," Calrin explained. "We found a total of sixteen such sets. The one you're holding is of average quality and covers a smaller area."

"Farming disks?" Zac asked with some confusion. "What do they do?"

"Farming arrays help with farming, of course. These ones combine five different arrays. It provides energy gathering, energy infusion, irrigation,

fertilization, and low-grade pest control,” Calrin said. “Better ones can also speed up maturity times, though that’s usually done by the farmer’s skills.”

Zac looked down at the nifty arrays with surprise. Planting these on a field would truly make life a lot easier for a farmer, and it was a good gift to David if he truly had his mind set on farming in seclusion. But he wasn’t ready to meet up with Hannah at the moment, even if Janos had worked on her mind. Getting stabbed by your ex wasn’t something you got over in a day, not even in this new ruthless world.

Even more surprisingly, there were four Spirit Tools in the collection. There was a large golden bow, a seemingly unremarkable sword that possessed a dense killing intent, a mage’s staff that seemed to continuously absorb the Cosmic Energy from the area, and finally a small paintbrush.

Zac was especially surprised to learn that the small brush was a Spirit Tool, but he soon understood its use after Calrin’s explanation. It could both be used for inscriptions and attacks for certain classes like Calligraphers.

Kenzie had already laid claim to the staff, but since he didn’t have any specific people in mind for the other three Spirit Tools, he decided to put them in the Merit Exchange as top prizes instead of hoarding them. Hopefully, it would motivate some people to work harder if they saw they could even get Spirit Tools with merit points.

There were also dozens of pieces of gear that weren’t Spirit Tools but as high quality as his new shield. Zac would have Kenzie gift them just like the Attribute Fruits, as long as there were proper recipients. They could be of great assistance in the upcoming battle, after all.

Zac took two defensive rings and a defensive amulet for himself and gave the same to Kenzie, who put them on. She already had the protective array on her that he’d bought before the hunt, but that only worked on the island. Having a few backups wouldn’t hurt.

Apart from the gear, there were also a ton of convenient items that would be a great addition to any cultivator’s survival kit. There was a small mountain of healing pills, all of them better than the standard-grade items that the General Stores sold.

There were also quite a few onetime items in the vein of the Thunder Punishment Array that he’d used during the beast hordes. Most of the ones he had found were useless for himself, but they might save the lives of the soldiers.

Zac decided to make two such items a part of the standard kit for the

Valkyries and demons, which would hopefully improve the survival rate in the upcoming battles. They were things such as fireball talismans or shield beads that soaked up some damage for the user for a short duration.

There were a few stronger items as well, and Zac ended up saving two of them for himself. One was a pitch-black glass ball that the old Sky Gnome called a **[Void Ball]** with some fear in his eyes. It was a truly dangerous item that actually caused a temporary tear in space.

It was only an E-grade ball, but it would destabilize over a hundred meters around it. If Zac himself wasn't far enough, he would kill himself since he couldn't withstand spatial rifts even with his recent upgrades to his Endurance. In fact, almost nothing in the F-grade could withstand the spatial storms from the **[Void Ball]**, meaning that it could be used for anything from widespread carnage to destroying arrays.

The second item he kept for himself was a defensive item. It looked like a golden walnut, and it was simply called **[Bramble Wall]**. If he infused it with Cosmic Energy, it would turn into an enormous dome of thick brambles that could protect against almost any attacks.

Better yet, Zac had a feeling he would be able to strengthen the item even further with the help of his Dao of Trees. It wasn't very useful for him personally, but it would make great last-ditch protection if his whole army was in danger from some widespread attack. The **[Bramble Wall]** could spread a lot further compared to even his souped-up **[Nature's Barrier]**, which wasn't designed for large area protection.

Unexpectedly, the simple-looking prayer mat he'd found in the first temple also ended up in his own treasure pile. It was a very valuable item made from D-grade materials. It was mainly used by cultivators, but it could even help a mortal to absorb Cosmic Energy faster. Sitting on the mat after a battle would allow Zac to get back to fighting condition almost twice as fast.

Zac felt that his force would gain a huge all-around boost by the large pile he had just gone through. Some items were even upgrades for himself, who already possessed some of the best gear on Earth. They would be enormous upgrades for the Valkyries and the demon warriors. And all this was just the smallest of the three categories of loot.

The second smallest pile of treasures was the one that Calrin would sell through the Thayer Consortium since most would be placed into the Merit Exchange. Port Atwood was simply lacking just about everything at the moment, so most items would be kept. Still, Calrin estimated the sell-off

would bring Zac another 250 to 300 million Nexus Coins.

A large portion of the items in the sell-off pile was things like gear from the thousands of fallen that had accumulated in his pouch. Each item was only worth a couple of thousand Nexus Coins, but Calrin believed he could sell the items in bulk to some low-grade planets. It was the same with the various pills of average efficacy.

There were also a few dozen low-grade cultivation manuals that Calrin didn't recommend keeping in the Merit Store. It would almost be a disservice to allow his own citizens to cultivate using such shitty manuals since it could cause trouble for them down the line.

Instead, the Sky Gnome would pawn them off to hapless rogue cultivators in the Multiverse for a few million a pop. Zac felt a bit bad about it, but he needed money, and the cultivators could only blame themselves if they bought such an important item without understanding it properly.

The final pile would be used to stimulate every sector of Port Atwood, and it ranged from everything from Nexus Crystals to weapons and armor to knowledge. The information crystals that Zac got from Anzonil was the best collection he got, but not the only one. There were multiple other crystals that Zac got, mainly from killing the emperor.

Those crystals covered everything from blacksmithing to alchemy, though Zac knew that those were just minor paths in the Eastern Trigram Sect. Still, they would bring a great boost to the productivity and skill of the artisans of the island, especially when combined with the Celestial Artisan Heritage.

The Sky Gnomes estimated the final pile to be valued at roughly 700 million Nexus Coins, excluding the information crystals. That meant that the two piles of average treasures were worth around a billion Nexus Coins, and that was only a small part of the total wealth he'd brought back. It was an enormous number and much more than what he possessed before.

Zac couldn't even imagine the total wealth he'd have brought back if the System hadn't adjusted the trial ground and removed the really valuable items. What if the odd Mystic Realm in his possession possessed equivalent wealth as the original Eastern Trigram Sect? Ogras seemed to believe that the realm had roughly the same power levels as the sect, after all.

It all depended on what the rest of the odd structure Ogras described contained, but even if they turned into salvagers and stripped the metals from the walls, they would likely make billions. That meant that there might be

some really valuable things further in.

Zac had thought that hunting beasts was the most efficient way for him to get richer since he was able to gain tens of millions of Nexus Coins in a day if he pushed himself. But exploring ruins in Mystic Realms or looting enemy forces was clearly more lucrative, and Zac understood why there was so much conflict in the Multiverse. War was an extremely profitable business, as long as you won.

A wave of melancholy hit Zac as he thought about life in the Multiverse. He would likely never be able to just sit back and relax since there would always be other people improving while eyeing his wealth. But Zac was soon brought out of his slightly morbid musings by some movement outside his courtyard. He looked up and slightly smiled when he saw who it was.

Emily had changed quite a bit in the past month.

RUNIC SHAMAN

Zac put away the last of the treasures before he deactivated the arrays surrounding his courtyard. In the end, he needed over thirty Cosmos Sacks to fit everything he wasn't keeping for himself, and it would have been higher if Calrin hadn't taken care of the pile that was to be sold off. Luckily, all of the things he would keep for himself would fit in his personal Cosmos Sack without trouble.

Emily perked up the moment the shields surrounding the courtyard deactivated, and rushed inside. Zac blanked out for a second before he looked her up and down with amusement. For some reason, she had stylized herself as a barbaric warrior, with different wolf pelts as armor all around her. It was a pretty odd look considering how temperate the island was.

Her hair was braided backward like a Celtic warrior princess, perhaps to not get in the way during battle. She even had some paint markings on her face while the rest was covered in a veneer of dirt from days in the woods.

There were also clear indicators of her having been through harsh battles, as she was bandaged in multiple spots, and Zac frowned upon noting there even were a few scars. Still, the small wounds hadn't put a damper on the teenager as she ran over.

Unsurprisingly there were also two axes attached to a belt on her hip, meaning she had stuck to her decision to try to get a class related to the same weapon type as himself. But as she got closer, Zac finally noticed one startling change. She looked younger.

Even before, she had been pretty scrawny for her age, but now she almost looked like a kid. Zac couldn't put his finger on what exactly had changed, but she reminded him of when his sister was around twelve years old.

Zac's brows rose when he suddenly understood why she had changed in this peculiar manner. It must have been the Fruit of Ascension that made her look younger when she evolved. It was the same with himself when he evolved to the E-grade race. He was already thirty, but he looked like he was in his early twenties now.

Evolving seemed to remove markings of age due to things such as lifestyle and environment, apart from slightly improving one's features. It just wasn't quite as pronounced with Emily due to her young age. But it still looked a bit comical to Zac, and he couldn't help snorting when he realized she might look like a brat for decades due to her improved longevity.

"It's your fault!" Emily snarled like an enraged wildcat, clearly having figured out the reason for Zac's amusement. "Your stupid fruit! Alyn told me I will look like a kid for, like, twenty years now."

"A lot of old ladies would give anything to be in your position," Kenzie said from the side with a smile. "Besides, you will be able to slightly change your appearance when you reach Peak E-grade, according to Alyn."

"Looking young is a sign of great talent in the Multiverse," Calrin added. "It means you have quickly progressed on the path of cultivation. Sometimes you would see great powerhouses looking like children. Those are the ones you need to be extra careful around."

Zac smiled and was about to respond as well when a blazing axe suddenly materialized in Emily's hand while she looked at them with wild eyes. It looked like a small tomahawk wrought out of scorching flames. The next moment, she threw it straight at Zac with a wild look in her eyes. Had the teenager finally snapped?

The scene was a bit alarming, but Zac didn't feel any danger, so he didn't move. He didn't think that Emily would be able to harm him even if she wanted to. The flaming axe unerringly flew at him, and to his surprise, it entered his body without resistance.

He felt a flash of heat spreading through his whole body, but not in a bad way. It was like he had drunk a warm beverage on a cold day. He even felt a bit invigorated by it.

"Hehe, surprised? Did I scare you?" Emily said with a wide smile. "That's what you get."

Zac snorted and shook his head. She had clearly been waiting for a while to use this thing on him, so he would let her have this one. Rather than arguing, he instead looked inward to see the effect of the warmth spreading

through his body. It was beneficial, and it slightly reminded him of the energy from **[Hatchetman's Rage]**, without the detriments.

He quickly opened up his status screen, and he quickly realized he was right. His Strength and Dexterity had both increased by a whopping 5%, meaning he had gained 40 attribute points. Zac quickly looked up at Emily to see her whole form blaze with the same types of flames the axe was made from before subsiding.

“Wow! Your attributes are crazy. No wonder you're on the top of the ladder,” Emily exclaimed.

“What is this skill?” Zac asked. “How long can you keep it up?”

Emily didn't immediately answer and instead glared at the four Sky Gnomes, who were still in the courtyard. Calrin rolled his eyes in response, but soon the four of them said their goodbyes, leaving only Zac, Kenzie and Emily in the courtyard.

“It should boost you with 5% Strength and Dexterity, right?” Emily said, making Zac nod.

“I can keep it up for an hour right now, but I'm sure it will get longer as I level up. During that time, I get the same amount of bonus attributes as you do. But even during normal times, it gives me a 5% bonus. I also have an Earth Axe that gives Endurance and Vitality, and a mage axe,” Emily proudly said. “But I can only use one at the time.”

“You get the bonus as well?” Zac exclaimed with shock.

Five percent of his Strength and Dexterity was a pretty big boost for someone at her level, and her defensive axe would give even more attributes.

“Yeah, I get almost 50 bonus attributes from this skill now. You will have to come with me when I hunt later! And you can't leave me on the island any longer. I can protect myself and even help out now,” Emily eagerly said.

“Just what is your class?” Zac couldn't help asking.

“It's called Runic Shaman. I can buff one person at the time with my axes and also fight with magically infused axes. It's the coolest class ever, and it's even Rare!” Emily said with pride.

Zac smiled and nodded. Clearly, the Fruit of Ascension had helped her get a great class, but the fruit alone wasn't enough. And he had to admit, it would be great to keep her around while traveling. If she could boost him this much right now, how would it look when she gained higher mastery of the skills?

But she was still not very strong on her own, and he was afraid that she

would be targeted if his enemies found out she could empower him. He remembered all too well how he himself had handled the Medhin warriors who used the War Arrays. Emily noted Zac's hesitation, and a scowl started to appear on her face.

"You told me you would take me with you after I gained a class, and now I have!" she said with a glare. "You have already found your family, but I am still looking for mine!"

Zac sighed as he looked at the irate teenager. What she said was true. A big reason why she worked herself so hard was that she still hoped to find her two siblings. Zac knew that the likelihood of both of them still living was slim, even if they were both cultivators. But she had the right to look for them.

"How about this," Zac said after mulling it over. "I am going to Westfort tomorrow, the base of operations of the Marshall Clan. They have as good an information network as the New World Government. Why don't you come with me? Perhaps they have found the town where your siblings were dropped off."

"Great! I'll start packing," Emily exclaimed, her demeanor making a complete turn. "I'm going to go pack!"

She left the courtyard like a whirlwind before Zac had a chance to change his mind. He didn't even have time to ask about her level and titles. But Kenzie apparently knew what was on his mind and explained Emily's situation.

"She can protect herself against most warriors already; she's stronger than you think. She has pushed herself extremely hard since she gained her level. She even managed to kill a level 51 beast as her first kill," Kenzie explained.

"What?" Zac said, extremely surprised. "How the hell is that possible?"

He knew that the only reason that he was able to get the "Slayer of Leviathans" title was that he'd lucked out on his roll against the Herald. For Emily to defeat such a powerful beast by herself was shocking. He remembered how he'd barely survived the fight against Vul, the Barghest Alpha. At that time, he was almost level 20, and he had a slew of titles to empower him.

"She gained two very strong advantages before even turning sixteen. She both attained a Dao and upgraded her race. You know how good those titles are you get from that. After that, we found a very weak beast on Mystic

Island,” Kenzie explained.

“She formed a Dao Seed!?” Zac exclaimed before calming down. “But still.”

“Between an offensive Dao and a high-quality weapon, she almost killed the beast in one surprise strike,” Kenzie continued. “After that, she slowly killed it with the help of a fireball skill she bought from the Nexus Crystal. The beast only managed to get in one blow, but she used her defensive gear.”

Zac slowly nodded, realizing that Emily had quite a few advantages that he’d never had when fighting Vul. An offensive Dao added a huge spike in power, and it was such a Dao Seed that allowed him to kill an E-grade beast in his Draugr form. Using a Dao Seed to kill a level 50 beast made sense.

Still, he hadn’t expected Emily to even attain a Dao Seed before officially embarking on the path of cultivation. According to Ogras, it was practically unheard of on his own home world. With all those titles, Emily might actually be stronger than the Valkyries by now.

Learning about Emily’s situation was like a rock having been lifted off his shoulders. He truly felt he had made the right decision. His only regret was that she seemed to have gained a hybrid class that was part support. Such a class would be invariably weaker in battle compared to a pure combat class.

“Has anyone else on the island managed to form a Dao Seed before turning sixteen?” Zac suddenly asked.

“Not that we know of, but Alyn increased the amount of meditation for all children in the Academy after learning of Emily’s situation. I think it’s extremely rare, even with the help of Origin Dao,” Kenzie said hesitantly. “But perhaps we can luck out and get another one.”

Zac simply shrugged in response. He didn’t hold too high hopes for that happening. Once was already a miracle without the help of a powerhouse showing the way. Besides, the Origin Dao would disperse and integrate with the world in the following years, making the window of opportunity pretty brief.

“Speaking of meditation,” Zac said as he started walking toward the teleporter on his compound. “Come with me for a bit.”

“Wait, what about those things?” Kenzie said and pointed at the gardening golems idly standing in a corner of the courtyard.

Zac stopped with a start since he had completely forgotten about those things. When Kenzie and the gnomes had taken the golems out, they were completely lifeless unlike when Zac had snatched them from the alchemist’s

mountain. No matter what kind of prodding they tried, they were completely inert, so they'd simply placed them to the side before moving on.

After some hesitation, Zac put them into his private pouch. He did sort of want to leave them there to see whether they would wake up by themselves and start cleaning, but he was afraid they would freak out instead and start demolishing the whole place. He needed to be present in case that happened.

Soon the two stepped through the teleporter and appeared in Azh'Rodum. They quickly exited the town before they attracted any real attention and then entered the mines from a side tunnel. Zac then quickly led his sister through the winding paths inside the mountain until they stood in front of the unassuming rock leading to his cultivation cavern.

"These mountains really are amazing," Kenzie said with a sigh when they stopped. "Jeeves says this place is probably among the top ten zones on Earth for cultivation. After they have been doused in the Cosmic Energy for a few centuries, they will become true Sacred Mountains."

"If you think the mountains are good, you'll like this," Zac said with a grin as he undid the arrays hiding the cavern before he moved the boulder out of the way.

Dense Cosmic Energy poured out of the cavern like a punch in the face, and Kenzie's eyes widened in shock as she took a deep breath. Zac indicated for her to go inside, and then placed the boulder back behind them to hide the entrance again. Next, he quickly activated the arrays again to prevent the energy from leaking out.

"This place... It's crazy!" Kenzie said as she looked around in wonder at the extremely dense flora growing in the cavern. "Even the mundane plants have gained spirituality from the enormous amount of energy. Did you make this place?"

However, Zac didn't answer, as all his focus was on the pond with Cosmic Water. His heart quickly hammered with wild elation as he hurried over, only stopping right at the edge of the pond. His mouth curved upward as he looked at the sight.

A lotus no larger than his hand lazily bobbed on the surface.

CULTIVATION CAVE

Kenzie noticed Zac's preoccupation and walked over next to him in front of the Cosmic Water pond.

"What is that flower?" Kenzie said with interest after seeing Zac's stare.

"A present from Abbot Everlasting Peace," Zac explained. "He gave me a seed from a high-grade lotus. I wasn't sure it would germinate. But the effect here is even better than I anticipated. I thought it would take much longer for it to start growing."

"What does it do?" Kenzie said.

Zac hesitated a bit, but in the end, he decided not to tell Kenzie about the horrible state that the Abbot was in. He trusted his sister to not tell anyone else about it, but he felt he shouldn't betray the old man's confidence.

"It produces massive amounts of life-attuned energy. So it can both heal people and prolong life. It's small now, but it will grow a lot bigger later. Sitting on it will probably speed up your cultivation by a large degree when you cultivate later," Zac explained instead.

It was true. The old Abbot had lost a few placements on the ladder the last month, but in the end, he had pretty much kept pace with the people on the ladder even though he didn't go to the hunt. The massive number of beasts had boosted the average levels on the ladder by a huge degree, far quicker than the average speed was on Earth, yet he held on.

"Jeeves says it contains intricate signs of life," Kenzie said as she looked down on the lotus. "But he needs to upgrade to understand it properly."

"Upgrade?" Zac asked with confusion, finally tearing his eyes away from the small flower.

"Yeah. Jeeves is like a Spirit Tool. He needs to upgrade to keep helping

me after I reach E-grade,” Kenzie said, a small frown forming on her face. “But he doesn’t know what he needs.”

“You didn’t find anything from my treasure pile that could help?” Zac asked.

“No, nothing...” Kenzie said with a sigh before looking up at him with steady eyes. “Zac, I still think we should find Mom. Especially now with the Great Redeemer.”

Zac was about to immediately reject the proposition, but his sister sped up when she saw the frown forming on his face.

“Wait, just listen. If she’s really a Technocrat, she can help, right? Aren’t they some of the most powerful people around?” Kenzie hurriedly explained. “Besides, don’t you want to meet her again?”

Zac froze, not really knowing what to think about what Kenzie said. Leandra was no longer a part of his life, so he hadn’t even considered her as a solution since he’d learned about the Great Redeemer. But honestly, what Kenzie said made some sense.

The Technocrats were probably an A-grade force, considering they were still around after having made the System their enemy, though Zac guessed that it consisted of lower-grade families and groups as well. If their mother had the ability to create something as miraculous as Jeeves, she should possess a lot of other terrifying means as well.

He suddenly remembered the story about the Technocrat who visited the Creators. That man had had weapons that could blow up whole planets without breaking a sweat, so creating tools that could kill off a rogue D-grade cultivator shouldn’t be a problem.

However, bringing the attention of the Technocrats might bring more trouble than good. Jeeves was too big a cheat. It didn’t only fuse technology and cultivation, it even seemed to upgrade every single part about her, from her basic constitution to class choices.

Such a thing would cause a storm the moment it became known in the Multiverse. Everyone would want it for themselves, and not just the Technocrats. No one would say no to having a tool that worked like a continuous source of free improvements that made them stand out from the rest of the cultivators.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea; there are too many risks involved,” Zac eventually said.

Kenzie seemed to gear up for an argument, so Zac quickly started to

explain his thoughts.

“Wait, you should have asked around about the Technocrats by now, so you know what kind of force Mom might belong to. Almost all the forces in the Multiverse are their enemies. If we start sending out probes through Calrin, we have no idea what kind of problems we would attract. I don’t even think we have the qualifications to start looking for her or the Technocrats at the moment,” Zac said with a shake of his head. “We can’t even buy low-tiered goods. Finding someone from an A-grade force? There’s no chance we can even afford a scrap of information,” Zac continued. “Besides, there are too many things we don’t know about Mom.”

“But that’s why we need to start looking,” Kenzie retorted. “Don’t you want to find some answers?”

“I do, but I don’t have anywhere to start. I looked through our house; there was nothing,” Zac said. “Besides, we don’t know what she was even doing on Earth before the integration. Was she in hiding? From whom? Perhaps she fled the Technocrats and is no longer part of them. If we start asking around for her, we might inadvertently cause her trouble.”

The two kept going back and forth for a while, not getting anywhere. Zac could only sigh and somewhat relent in the end.

“I’ll try to figure something out, I promise. But we have to be careful. I don’t want to have some angry Technocrat flashing over here and blowing up Earth just to spite Mom or something, alright?” Zac sighed.

“Alright, fine,” Kenzie said and sat down to cultivate some distance away.

But Zac saw that she didn’t agree, and he could only shake his head as he sat down himself a few meters away from her. He trusted his sister, but the lives of billions of people were at stake. He didn’t want to muddy the waters any further by dragging a bunch of Technocrats into the mix, so he made a mental reminder to himself to make sure Calrin didn’t do any probes for their mother.

Zac couldn’t cultivate, but just sitting in this extremely nourishing environment felt quite nice as well, and Zac was content to just relax for a bit. He hadn’t realized it until now, but he had been awake almost nonstop for three days.

He had been frenziedly hunting beasts at the end to beat out the Medhin princeling for the third position on the Hunter Ladder, and as soon as he got back, there were various things to take care of for two straight days. He had

even closed a whole incursion without skipping a beat.

But Zac was tired to his bones, and it only took moments until he was deep asleep. It was only six hours later he woke up, making it his longest nap for months. He cracked his neck and stood up, and to his surprise, he saw that Kenzie was still deep in cultivation.

Energy was slowly swirling around her before it entered her body through all her pores, and Zac was shocked at the amount she was able to absorb. It was so much that he could sense it, and he couldn't help but feel a bit jealous. In just a few seconds, enough energy to match a barghest kill entered his sister's body.

Kenzie somehow noticed that Zac had woken up.

"Don't overwork yourself," she said with some worry after seeing his tired state. "You're not alone, you know? There's a lot of people here who can share your burden."

"I know," Zac said with a smile. "I'll leave this place to you. You can bring Emily as well if you think the energy is enough for the two of you, but no one else, not even your two friends. And look after the flower, please."

"Thanks, I'll take care of it. You know, I thought about it. You should make a Miasma chamber next to this place," Kenzie said. "Like dig a second pond and turn it into Miasma."

Zac's eyes lit up at her suggestion, but he was unsure about the feasibility. It would be nice to have a Miasma zone on the island, especially so close to the flower. But he was afraid things would get out of hand if he put up an Unholy Beacon next to the pond, so he would have to wait a bit before he tried those things out.

"It's not a bad idea." Zac nodded. "But I'll wait until I can make sure I don't ruin this place and the valley above. I'll hopefully do the inheritance today before heading to Westfort. Are you staying here?"

"I'll stay here for a bit more. The cultivation speed here is amazing, but unfortunately, I think I would hurt the environment if I stayed here around the clock. The energy needs to be released from the pond to restock the atmosphere," Kenzie said.

After Kenzie mentioned it, Zac actually noticed the density of Cosmic Energy in the cave had decreased somewhat, but it was still far above and beyond anything else on the island.

"Well, I'm sure you have a handle on it," Zac said as he fiddled a bit with the Town Shop menu. "I've given you control of the arrays around this place

as well; you should be able to come and go as you please now. And don't jump into the water, it'll kill you."

"I know what Cosmic Water is," Kenzie said with a roll of her eyes. "I'm not an idiot. Be careful in there, and tell Ogras not to overdo it. I don't think Brazla will do anything bad, but he refuses to tell me what to expect from the trials."

Zac only coughed, relieved he'd never mentioned how he jumped into the pond to escape the poison back in the day. He left Kenzie to her devices and headed back to the town. The suns were starting to rise, meaning it was close to 4 a.m. However, Azh'Rodum was already coming alive, with a lot of miners already heading toward the mineshafts.

Since people were paid a portion of what they mined, a lot of people spent most of their time in the tunnels for a week, and then a week on cultivation with help of the crystals they had mined. Zac no longer had full insight into how much the mine yielded, but it was a substantial number of crystals each day. His small refinement machine had gotten a dozen big brothers that were churning out over a million crystals every week.

A large part of it went to the Academy to nurture his army and the young, and another chunk to power the increasingly numerous arrays that helped with everything from protecting the town from the wildlife to farming. He was also providing the whole population with a small allowance to boost everyone's base power, for now. But a lot of it went straight into the town coffers, which essentially was his own private property.

Unfortunately, he had no use for F-grade crystals at the moment, and he didn't possess any means to reliably convert them to higher-grade crystals. Of course, he could sell them for Nexus Coins, but he didn't see the need for it since there wasn't a lot he could do with money at the moment.

Earth essentially had been placed under a trading embargo for strategic resources until they had proven their strength by booting out all the invaders. Calrin could only get a very limited quantity of high-quality goods, and that was only if there was a surplus supply.

He took the teleportation array in Azh'Rodum to the main teleporter in Port Atwood and immediately headed over to the government building. Between Adran and Abby, there was always at least one of them working, and he quickly found the Stargazer looking through a bunch of documents that hovered in front of her.

"Lord Atwood," Abby said as she looked over at him, "what brings you

here so early?”

“I wanted to check in on the progress of our projects,” Zac said as he sat down in a chair in front of her.

“I have tasked Mr. Trang to send one of his vessels back to the desert continent to set up a proper base camp,” Abby began without missing a beat. “As for the digging operation in the mines, we have hit a bit of a snag.”

“Snag how?” Zac asked with surprise.

“There are whole biodomes of subterranean animals the further down we dig. Everything from large white lizards to thousands of vampiric bats,” the Stargazer said with some annoyance. “But luckily, the beasts are not too strong. I had Alyn send a few companies down the mines to clean them out. It will do them good to fight something else than Barghest.”

“So how long until you think we reach the bottom of my influence?” Zac said.

“It depends on what else we find in the depths. They are surprisingly full of life, perhaps because we got merged with a subterranean planet? But I would guess at least two weeks,” Abby estimated.

Zac slowly nodded as he mentally planned his next course of action. It was a bit disappointing to hear about the delay since he had somewhat wanted to head down to the underworld before he put himself against the undead incursion.

It felt like the undead might be his strongest enemies apart from the Dominators, and he wanted to reach level 75 before he challenged millions of Zombies and the Lich King. Not because he planned to immediately evolve, but rather that he would gain his two ultimate skills upon reaching the max level. Closing the underground incursion first had been his idea to quickly reach level 75.

But there was another opportunity, the inheritance. Perhaps those old powerhouses had left something nice behind that could give him the final push of the F-grade.

“As for the... beautification around the towers,” Abby added as if reading his mind, “they’re all done. Even that Tool Spirit should be happy with the result.”

INHERITANCE

“Great,” Zac said with some excitement.

He had been looking forward to the inheritance for quite some time now, and it was finally time to see what one of the old powerhouses had left behind for future generations. It could affect his whole future in a sense.

Inheritances weren't as narrow as a Heritage, which usually showed how to attain a certain class. An inheritance didn't pigeonhole one's progress like that, but they were simply the treasures and insights a predecessor left behind. They could contain anything from a mountain of crystals to specific Dao insights. But the most common thing was that the things left behind were meant to nurture a possible successor from beyond the grave.

A successor didn't necessarily need to have the same class, but he would generally walk down the same path. The Umbra would no doubt be related to darkness and shadows, for example. So it would most likely be far more valuable for someone like Ogras than for Zac.

Perhaps the demon would receive a supreme Spirit Tool that would suit a certain fighting style or some treasure that made his shadows stronger. The possibilities were endless. But before he could undergo the trial, there were a few things to do.

“Keep up the good work,” Zac said as he made to leave.

“One second, Lord Atwood,” Abby said, making Zac stop and turn back toward the Stargazer.

“I mentioned the wish of the Anointed to speak with you earlier,” Abby said. “I relayed how busy your schedule was, and that you might not be able to visit in the near future due to heading to Westfort. So the Anointed came here in person.”

“Nonet is here?” Zac said with some surprise.

The large Zhix had never left its hive since meeting Zac as far as he knew. That Nonet showed up now proved that they really needed to speak with him.

“Do you know what Nonet wants?” Zac asked.

“Not sure; they didn’t say,” Abby admitted. “But I believe the Zhix wishes to accompany you to Westfort.”

Zac’s brows rose in surprise, but after mulling it over for a few seconds, he thought it might not be too bad an idea. There was a hive not too far from Thea’s town, and considering that they had fought quite a bit without a clear winner, it should be a pretty strong one.

He still wanted to come in contact with the so-called council of Anointed in order to start coordinating a response to the Dominators, and bringing Nonet would probably expedite that even more than even bringing Ibtep would.

“Make sure they’re ready later. I plan on hitting the inheritance in a few hours, but according to Ogras, it shouldn’t take long,” Zac said.

Abby bobbed in agreement.

“You shouldn’t worry too much. The first trial of orthodox inheritances are usually largely based on suitability,” Abby said.

Zac was reminded that Abby herself came from a species that excelled at information gathering, and quickly tried to fish out some more information while she was in a giving mood.

“What do you mean?” he asked with interest.

“Most who leave an inheritance are people with regret their path ended, and they want someone to pick up the mantle where they fell short. They hope that someone will reach grand heights using their Dao Vision. It’s in a sense a way for them to prove to the world that their path of cultivation was correct,” Abby started. “So the first tests are usually a test of suitability and a test of talent. You will need to prove you walk the same general path, and that you are talented enough that you have the potential to walk at least as far as the predecessor themselves.”

“I’m a mortal,” Zac said with a frown. “Will that be a problem?”

“Not sure, but I doubt they would test for that. A test for talent might be to kill something ten levels above you, or have enough points in the right attribute,” Abby said. “The spirit might be a bit disappointed that you show up as a mortal, but they can’t stop you. Inheritance sites are created with

certain rule sets, and a spirit usually isn't able to change those rules.”

“Spirit?” Zac said with some confusion until he remembered Anzonil.

The old Supreme Elder had left behind a part of his soul to maintain the cleansing array for his disciple, so it wasn't out of the question that the powerhouses who left the inheritances did something similar.

Zac asked a few more questions, but in the end, there was no strict form to an inheritance. Each one was designed by the predecessor according to their will and preferences. The largest risk was that they encountered unorthodox inheritances.

Unorthodox inheritances could take many forms, but entering one was seldom an opportunity. They were mostly left behind by sinister cultivators, and some were simple death traps to kill as many as possible. Some cultivators even tried to use an inheritance to find suitable people to possess or turn into puppets.

But there was almost no chance that the System would give out unorthodox inheritances as a reward, so Zac didn't worry too much about it as he hurried back to his courtyard. As soon as he got back, he sat down and took out the jade boxes containing the Attribute Fruits.

He didn't waste any time as he stuffed one odd fruit after another into his mouth. They had all kinds of tastes and textures, and the only thing they had in common was that they were extremely delicious.

At the beginning of his feast, he only felt a growing warmth in his body, but when he had eaten half of his personal collection, he started to feel uncomfortable. His body was racked with chaotic swirls of energy, and it almost felt like his body would explode.

Normally, one would eat these things slowly one by one, but Zac had no time for that. Besides, he had absorbed far more chaotic energies than this before, so he knew that his body could take it. The minutes passed, and he was soon proven right as all the cells in his body started to absorb the energies, and after two hours he dared to start eating more of the fruits.

It was around 10 a.m. he had completely absorbed the thirty-three fruits that he had put aside for himself, and the results were pretty good.

Name: Zachary Atwood

Level: 73

Class: [F-Rare] Hatchetman

Race: [E] Human

Alignment: [Earth] Port Atwood – Lord

Titles: Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt – 1st

Limited Titles-

Dao: Seed of Heaviness – High, Seed of Trees – High, Seed of Sharpness – Middle, Seed of Hardness – Middle, Seed of Sanctuary – Early

Core: [F] Duplicity

Strength: 582 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 121%]

Dexterity: 290 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 121%]

Endurance: 715 [Increase: 71%. Efficiency: 121%]

Vitality: 353 [Increase: 61%. Efficiency: 121%]

Intelligence: 131 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 121%]

Wisdom: 146 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 121%]

Luck: 132 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 121%]

Free Points: 0

Nexus Coins: [F] 296,516,043

He had gained 11 points in Strength and Dexterity, 10 points in Endurance and Wisdom, 9 points in Vitality, 8 points in Intelligence and 7 points in Luck from the fruits. Together with the 20 points in Strength and 4 points in Dexterity he had allocated from his free points, he had made another pretty huge leap.

He was even closing in on 2,500 attribute points, something that very few people in the F-grade would ever accomplish. He remembered that would also give him another title, perhaps even an upgraded one since he would no doubt be the first on the planet to accomplish such a thing.

Satisfied, Zac closed the status screen and stood up and turned toward a

shrouded corner of the courtyard. Zac had sensed that Ogras had appeared some time ago, but he had been busy absorbing the attribute treasures.

“It’s time,” Zac said, looking over at Ogras.

“Finally; I was going crazy over here,” Ogras muttered with an excited gleam in his eyes.

The two walked over toward the towers, and Zac had to say that he was impressed with what he saw when they arrived. The repository now stood in the middle of a large square shimmering in gold and white, giving it an almost celestial feeling. Someone had even created or found several large marble statues and had placed them at the edge of the circular square.

In each cardinal direction, there was also a fountain that continuously sprouted out glistening cascades of light. Since there was no proper plumbing in the area, Zac could only assume the effect was somehow powered with the help of arrays.

It was a huge contrast to the somewhat desolate area before, and Zac felt that even Brazla had to be satisfied with the change. The only slightly odd thing was that the square was not connected to anything at the moment. The placement of the repository was within his inner wall, and there wasn’t anything else close by. So the square simply ended after a bit and gave way to the inner wall on one side and forest on the other.

Ogras was suitably impressed as well, judging by his expression. The tiles that Zac had snatched from the summit palace were truly extravagant, and Zac had a feeling it would be extremely expensive if he wanted to buy something similar for his own courtyard.

“Those craftsmen you brought from New Washington are really coming in handy,” the demon said.

“Those people did this?” Zac asked with surprise since he had mostly assumed that the demons would have been responsible for the construction.

With all that had been going on, he had no time to focus on the artisans that he’d brought with him after the auction, but he was happy he took the chance with them all that time ago. If the engineers could produce something as impressive as this in just two days, perhaps the others had made as impressive strides in their respective crafts.

It was about time that his investments started to pay dividends. He was funding everything from inscribers to all kinds of artisans at the moment. He even offered free Nexus Crystals so that everyone could get a class without risking their lives against beasts.

“Yeah, they were a bit rambunctious in the beginning, but after a few beatings and a few incentives, they settled in properly.” Ogras shrugged. “I think they worked especially hard now that the Heritage is getting added to the merit list. This construction probably had pretty big merit incentives since we needed it done quickly.”

Zac nodded thoughtfully. He had already heard that it was as though people had been injected with adrenaline after hearing about the treasures and Heritages getting added to the merit list. People were working with an almost fanatical fervor to gain access to those things.

A large reason was due to the effect of the Contribution Store that the System provided during the monster waves. Those who had survived and racked up a lot of contribution had made huge improvements between the contribution rewards and getting access to a skill in the repository. Many saw the effect of gaining contribution points and wanted the same for themselves.

Some had a hard time getting accustomed to this odd new reality, but most had started to come around. There were no safety nets any longer, but hard work could conversely bring untold benefits. Who didn't want to live a few hundred years longer, for example?

The two stepped into the towers, and both their faces scrunched up when Brazla slowly descended from the roof, shrouded in a golden light.

“Your offering is passable, though barely,” Brazla said. “But do not become complacent. This is just the most rudimentary improvements for the surroundings of the great Brazla. But I recognize that your force is poor as paupers at the moment, and I will not be unreasonable.”

Zac felt his blood pressure increase, but he forcibly kept his temper in check.

“Glad you like it,” Zac tersely said. “We're here to take two of the inheritance trials.”

“Oh? Finally,” Brazla said, looking mostly disinterested. “Which ones?”

“I'll be taking the Umbra,” Ogras immediately said.

“Unsurprising; you are a shady type,” Brazla said with a dismissive shrug before turning to Zac. “What about you?”

PROVING ONE'S WORTH

“The Lord of Cycles,” Zac said with resolve in his eyes.

This was the final decision that Zac had arrived at after weeks of deliberation. He did consider taking Undying Fiend in hopes it was a defensive inheritance that might contain a Spirit Tool shield. But in the end, he chose the one that seemed to fit best overall with his current skill set.

Zac didn't know exactly what to expect from such an inheritance, but there might be various things that might increase the synergy between his two classes. The best would be to find a way to use both his classes at the same time. If he managed that, he'd be almost invincible.

“Oh, Lord of Cycles? Interesting. It's the first of the two C-grade inheritances as well, well chosen,” Brazla said with a nod.

“Which is the other one?” Zac quickly asked when he saw the Tool Spirit was in a sharing mood.

“I don't want to tell. Build something nice for me, and I might become more accommodating.” Brazla snorted. “Now, enter the portals. I won't assist you at all while you undertake the trial, and there is no exit. Final chance to change your mind.”

As he spoke, two fractals lit up in front of two of the huge statues that lined the hall. One of them was a humanoid whose features were hidden in a large cowl, each of his hands gripping a dagger. It was pretty clear it was the creator of the Umbra inheritance, and the demon immediately walked over.

The other statue that lit up was of a man or woman that looked human. The face was completely androgynous, so he couldn't tell its gender at all, but since he was called a Lord, Zac guessed he was male. He wore a loose robe and held his two hands together, forming a circle in front of his chest,

and behind him was a large disk split in the middle.

As Zac walked over, he tried to understand what type of class this person had, but he truly couldn't tell. The disk might work as a weapon, but Zac rather leaned toward this person being some sort of magic user, which might not be what he needed. The odd circle behind was split into two, one side looking like flames, while the other was ice.

He even hesitated for a second, considering whether he should switch over to the Undying Fiend even though its grade of inheritance likely was worse. He had a feeling that the last C-grade inheritance was the Crown of Despair, likely personified by the statue of the woman holding her head in her hands, but that one was likely an even worse fit for him.

But his eyes once again turned to the circle of fire and ice behind the Lord of Circles. It was this duality that made Zac believe that the Lord of Cycles had tried to do something similar to himself: merge two opposing elements.

For better or worse, Zac had already started walking the path of life and death. One of his classes veered toward nature, and the other side was an undead warrior turning the area around himself into a projection of the underworld.

He was hoping that the Lord of Cycles inheritance could help him create a coherent system of his two opposing sides and create something greater than the sum of its parts. Granted, each side of his two identities had its strong points, but there was currently no synergy between them apart from the extra attribute points.

He wanted to find a path that made sure both his classes were pushing toward the same goal, even though they were the opposites of each other. He had a feeling that something amazing would be created if he was able to fuse his two sides in the future, and this was the first step to reach that goal.

Since he had already made his decision, he resolutely stepped inside his own portal. The next moment, he found himself in front of a huge metal plaque in an otherwise empty field, and he quickly took out his axe as he looked around for any threats.

But no matter where he looked, he only saw a hazy mist, and his senses didn't warn him of any hidden dangers lurking about. So Zac put away **[Verun's Bite]** again as he looked at the large slab of metal in front of him. It was completely smooth and rectangular apart from a large engraving in the middle.

The engraving was not a large fractal, but rather a circular pattern

containing inscriptions of smaller fractals. There was an outer circle containing at least one hundred fractals, with a simple dot in the middle of the circle. Oddly enough, those fractals that formed a circle kept changing, taking one appearance after another in an endless cycle.

Odder yet, some of the fractals were drawn with extreme detail, rife with meaning to the point that his mind shuddered. Others were extremely crudely drawn, to the point they were barely any better than a child's scribbles.

Zac was confused about why some had such shoddy workmanship compared to others, but he barely had time to look at them before a familiar feeling entered his mind.

The Splinter of Oblivion woke up and became restless when he looked at one crude drawing in particular, and its tendrils started to furiously pound the miasmatic runes that had locked it away. Zac quickly closed his eyes until the splinter calmed down. Luckily, it seemed that the prison in his mind still held strong.

The eruption was an uncomfortable reminder that he hadn't gotten any closer to figuring out what to do about the alien object in his head. However, now was not the time, so he once again refocused on the patterns on the monument. And thankfully, the rune that had caused the reaction was already gone by the time he opened his eyes.

"Creation and Oblivion," Zac suddenly muttered with understanding.

The circle in front of him was a Dao Chart of opposites, somewhat related to what Anzonil had mentioned. Since the runes kept changing, Zac guessed the stele displayed multiple sets.

Some sets were intricately carved since the creator of the plaque understood them intimately. Others, like the set of Creation and Oblivion, were extremely crude, probably because the craftsman didn't have any real understanding of them.

"As night begets day, so does oblivion beget creation," an ethereal voice suddenly echoed across the field, as though it was responding to Zac's earlier musings. "The cycle restricts and empowers. Prove your duality."

Zac quickly looked around for the source of the voice, but no matter which direction he looked, there was nothing. The source of the gentle voice was nowhere to be seen, and he was still alone in the mists with the metal plaque in front of him.

However, he wasn't worried, but rather elated. The voice had essentially confirmed that the Lord of Cycles walked a similar path as himself. The

problem was how he would go about to prove his own cycle, that of life and death. Did he need to first force some Dao of Trees into the inscription, then kill himself to infuse Miasma next? It seemed extremely cumbersome, and he wasn't even sure it'd work.

Besides, did he need to know which fractal to infuse? All of them were completely inert, and it looked like someone had simply carved the fractals into the metal without empowering them with any Dao or other energies.

Zac chose to simply touch the monument in the end, and he quickly saw that he was on the right track. A deep hum erupted from the monument, and an invisible wave pushed out from it, trying to enter Zac's body.

The second that the wave came in contact with him, the bracer on his arm became scorching hot, and the invading force was immediately rebuffed. Nothing happened for a while, and Zac moved his hand away.

He hesitated for a bit, but he finally chose to remove the bracer that Greatest had given him before he once again touched the monument. He didn't love the idea of exposing his secrets like this, but he was inside a closed-off inheritance of a long-dead powerhouse. No one could spread his secrets from here, at least not as long as he was alive.

The wave entered his body one more time after he activated the monument, and he felt something was digging around and inspecting his whole body. The wave had turned into tendrils that poked and prodded him all over. But the scan was pretty cursory. The tendrils had a clear goal, and they soon focused their search on his mind.

Soon enough, five tendrils of Mental Energy were dragged out from his mind, each of them representing one of his five Dao Seeds. The Seed of Heaviness was touched first, but the tendrils soon moved on, seemingly not interested in it at all. Zac figured it was because he didn't have an opposite for Heaviness in his repertoire.

Perhaps if he had the Seed of Lightness, he might have been able to form a cycle of opposites. However, such a cycle probably didn't have too high a ceiling, certainly not compared to concepts like Life and Death. The same scene happened with the Seeds of Sharpness, Hardness, and Sanctuary, leaving only the Seed of Trees. But when the scan reached his final Dao, there was finally a change.

The moment the investigative method of the stele touched the mental Energy holding the Seed of Trees, the runes on the stele stopped changing. One of the fractals in the circle lit up, emitting a strong aura of vitality. It was

based on his Dao Seed, but Zac also felt it represented one of his main paths, the one of nature and life. Of course, he was still only on the periphery with his basic Dao.

At the same time, he saw that a Dao on the opposite side lit up, though its light was far weaker. When he sensed the fractal, it felt like he was prodding a carcass or something rotten, and after a second, Zac realized that fractal might have lit up due to the nature of his Dao Seed of Trees. His major insights into that seed were centered around life through death, and it was what he hoped would connect his Dao to his Draugr side.

But the light was still extremely dim, making Zac worry about his prospects. His Seed of Trees contained insights based on a cycle of opposites, but was a single Dao enough to satisfy a C-grade Monarch? He still didn't have an actual Dao that represented the opposite, like the Lord of Cycles seemed to follow both fire and ice.

Worry turned to dismay as the fractals slowly started to turn dim, to completely extinguish after a few seconds. The message was clear; it wasn't enough. The investigation had given up on his Daos, but they hadn't stopped looking around. Zac was filled with a mix of trepidation and hope when they actually found the miasmic prison for the splinter.

As soon as the inspection hit upon the runic prison in his mind, they immediately dissipated, and afterward, they stayed clear of the area. Zac wasn't too surprised since the prison had been created by the mysterious Draugr woman. He couldn't be sure, but he had a feeling she was one of the powerhouses of the Draugr race and likely more powerful than the Lord of Cycles.

It was like the brief encounter had scared away the tendrils, and they quickly left the area of his soul. Zac saw a second opportunity arise as the tendrils instead reached for his Specialty Core, going over the intricate patterns on its surface that represented his two classes.

The circle changed once more as two new fractals lit up. Both of them were similar yet different to the previous set, and the runes representing them were a lot cruder compared to the previous set.

However, what they represented was clear; Life and Death. The rune representing life was a bit related to the one he had lit up before. But the previous rune had made him think of boundless forests, and the myriad lives that lived within. The rune that now glowed in gold was purer and more concentrated in a sense, representing pure life, a seed of possibility.

On the opposite side was pure death, an endless abyss that made him think of the eyes of the Draugr lady he had encountered.

Both runes burned bright thanks to the whatever miraculous energies that made his Specialty Core possible. They were by far the best combination for him, but he didn't know if the inheritance would accept it since the two energies were simply the representation of his two races and classes. They were not really a result of his Daos, and Zac felt the Dao was the core of this test.

The monument kept checking his body for a bit until the inspection ended, leaving Zac feeling slightly violated. It was like he had been stripped naked and every nook and cranny had been inspected. Keeping one's cards close to the chest had been ingrained into him since the integration, and this was the complete opposite of that.

But at least it was over, and the two fractals representing Life and Death still burned bright, which hopefully meant that he had actually passed the trial. Zac looked around to see what would happen next, and he didn't need to wait long for a response.

"Understanding the self is understanding the cosmos," the same voice suddenly echoed out as the two fractals lit up with far more power compared to before, while the other runes on the stele grew more and more indistinct.

The next moment, the monument started to vibrate, and it looked like it was melting as it bent and twisted. All the fractals were quickly smoothed over, leaving only the two illuminated inscriptions.

The two fractals kept growing larger and larger as the monument turned into a large hovering metallic ball that started to pulsate with the powers of life and death. Soon the two fractals had grown to over a meter in size as they moved next to each other on the sphere. Both of them radiated the power of life and death, two extremely profound concepts that Zac had only glimpsed before.

As Zac sensed the great Dao energies that coursed through the inscriptions, he started to believe that this might be the first gift of the inheritance. Unfortunately, there wasn't much he could do with the Dao of Death since he had no matching Daos, but he might be able to glean some insight from the fractal representing life. That, in turn, might be the key to pushing the Dao Seed of Trees to Peak mastery.

But just as he was about to sit down to ponder on the secrets of the Dao of Life, his mind suddenly screamed of danger.

FIGHT FIRE WITH FIRE

Zac's mind was screaming at him to get away, and he had learned not to question his danger sense by now. He unhesitantly pushed backward with the help of **[Loamwalker]** only to see a spurt of liquid metal from the sphere lash out at him like a whip.

The air cracked as the line of darkness ripped through it, and Zac sensed a horrifying finality contained inside it. He wasn't simply being attacked by some liquid metal like when he'd fought Salvation. He was being attacked by *death*.

Luckily, he had reacted in time and was able to quickly create enough distance from the ball, allowing him to understand what was going on. The sphere made out of the metallic plaque had started to transform, not only in shape but also in composition.

It looked like the inert nature of the former monument was changing as it started to teem with both exuberant life force and desolate death. One half of it was gaining a golden sheen as the other half turned pitch-black.

It reminded Zac of his Duplicity Core, as it shared similar characteristics, with the difference that the sphere in front of him lacked the intricate inscriptions on the surface of his core. Another pretty obvious difference was that the ball in front of him was over five meters in diameter.

The sudden attack that had come at him had stemmed from a part of the death-attuned part of the sphere and had felt like a tentacle of death. But the whip was long gone, having returned to the main form, which now seethed with chaotic powers.

Zac had already taken out his axe and summoned a fractal edge. He still wasn't sure what was going on, but the thing had already attacked him, so he

wouldn't just stand around. That ball contained extremely dangerous Daos, and he couldn't let it act as it pleased. He felt it was best to destroy it first, then ask questions.

He imbued the fractal edge with the Dao of Sharpness, and with a grunt, unleashed it straight at the sphere so that he could destroy it before it managed to undergo whatever transformation it had in store. However, the moment the edge was about to slam into the floating ball, the golden side flashed, and a protective glow spread to cover the whole thing.

Luckily, the ball didn't retaliate, but instead, it kept changing form at an extremely rapid pace. It looked like it consisted of two different-colored shapes of clay that were pushed together, and currently, some unseen hands were twisting and reshaping the ball.

The object elongated again into an oblong shape. It almost had the form of an enormous matryoshka doll, apart from being slightly more rectangular and having two arms. One arm was mostly golden with some black veins running through it, but instead of a hand, it just had a large circle that reminded Zac of the object that was behind the statue depicting Lord of Cycles.

The other arm was mostly black and was the only part of the construct that still looked mostly liquid. It was this arm that had attacked him before it had properly formed, and it still radiated a terrifying aura. He truly didn't want to know what would happen if that thing hit him, but it felt extremely dangerous.

One thing that differed from both his Duplicity Core and the sphere from before was the main part of its body. It didn't simply have one side that was golden and another side that was black, but it had created an intricate mesh of the two colors, where neither side dominated the other.

Zac couldn't be sure, but he felt that the pattern that had been formed on its body was an enormous clue that could help him immensely if he only had proper time to study it. It was as though it represented the fusion of life and death. But unfortunately, he was in no position to ponder on the mysteries hidden in the body of the enormous doll. It floated toward him at a steady pace, and black motes of light started to rotate around the arm of death.

The moment it got within twenty meters of Zac, the arm once again lashed out, and Zac was forced to reposition himself again. The attack wasn't impossibly fast, but he didn't dare to intercept it until he had a better understanding of what the effect of the arm was.

Perhaps his Draugr form would be immune to the death-attributed arm, but he had no way to swap mid-battle. He would have to fight the thing as is. Zac quickly used **[Inquisitive Eye]**, and to his surprise, it actually worked, even though the information was a bit sparse.

[Life-Death Construct – Dao Vessel. Level 83]

The good news was that the thing was only level 83. The bad news was that it was clearly much stronger than some random early E-grade beast. Even worse, it possessed two very strong Daos. He wasn't sure how it worked with these particular Daos, but he suspected they were like the Dao of Time and Space – advanced Daos that had no basic seeds to attain. They were much too strong to gain as an F-grade cultivator.

That meant that the power they imbued was also far stronger than one should encounter at this stage in cultivation. He had a feeling that he truly had been boned by this combination, and it reminded him of the desperate fight with Inevitability. Life and Death were truly the most appropriate paths to fuse of the fractals that lit up, but they were far more dangerous than any others as well.

It would have been more reasonable for him to encounter a construct that consisted of the Dao of Trees and the Dao of Rot, or whatever that murky fractal represented. It would still have been a challenge, though not as bad as this one.

But since Zac knew its level, he also felt more confident. If it came down to it, he should be able to brute-force the thing. The only thing that was holding him back from summoning the giant hand of **[Nature's Punishment]** and smashing the construct to bits was that he wasn't sure if there was something else to this test than just destroying the construct.

He didn't want to slip up and ruin his inheritance, so before he went the usual route, he decided to test the thing out for a bit and perhaps glean any insights from the intricate pattern on its chest. Zac kept his distance from the large construct by occasionally flashing away with his movement skill as he peppered the thing with fractal edges.

The construct had multiple ways of handling the attacks. Sometimes the golden circle on its left arm lit up and formed a shield that blocked the attack. However, after seeing the shield a few times, he realized that it wasn't a traditional mage's bubble or array defense.

The golden layer was pure life-attuned energy, and it didn't block the attacks as much as it somehow swallowed them. The attacks entered the

golden shield, making it flicker a bit, but nothing exited at the other side.

Zac couldn't quite grasp what type of concept it utilized to neutralize his attacks. If it just used the Dao of Life to heal itself after getting hurt, he could have understood it, but this was something else entirely.

Suddenly, he sensed some danger again, and he started to reposition himself as he kept his eyes on the tentacle of death. But to his surprise, it wasn't the death-attuned side that attacked him, but rather the golden arm. A bright light lit up in the middle of the golden circle at the end of the arm, and the next moment, an energy ball shot straight at Zac.

Zac's brows rose in alarm as he quickly flashed away, but it didn't help one bit as the energy attack followed him like a bloodhound. It was also much faster than Zac was, even when utilizing **[Loamwalker]**, so in the end, he was forced to stop and erect his defenses.

Shimmering leaves whirled around him, each imbued with the Dao of Trees, as he took a defensive posture where he imbued his body with the Dao of Hardness. The energy ball zoomed straight toward him, and the leaves moved to intercept.

But the moment the ball touched the first layer of defense, the leaves lit up in a blazing emerald luster. Since Zac was the one who summoned it and imbued it with his Dao, he could sense what was going on, and he couldn't make heads or tails out of it. The leaves weren't getting damaged; they were getting empowered.

Unceasing and vast energies of life were flooding the leaves, and they shone brighter and brighter as they actually grew larger. But in just a second, the effect drastically changed, as the lights dimmed and the leaves started to wilt.

The next moment, they crumbled, and the light passed straight through. Zac's brows rose in alarm since he had acutely sensed what happened. The ball of life had pushed too much life force into the leaves, and even though they weren't real, the ball had forced the leaves to go through their natural state of life in just a second.

Zac immediately gave up his defense and tried to flash away again, but it was to no avail as the ball slammed into his back. The Dao of Hardness didn't help him in the slightest as it entered his body like a burning sun.

Zac's whole body turned red in an instant, veins popping out all over his body. It felt terribly similar to when he had been in the pond of Cosmic Water. Terrifying amounts of life tried to force themselves into his cells,

overtaxing them and forcing them into death. It was the opposite of his own insights; this was death through life – an attack using the natural life cycle.

Zac felt his life force getting spent at an alarming rate to exhaust the energy ball, and he was out of ideas of how to deal with the alien force in his body. It was just too strong and vast, and it felt like his Daos were children trying to push away a grown adult when he tried to utilize them to isolate the attack.

But suddenly, his Duplicity Core woke up and started to frenziedly absorb the energies in his body. It looked like the life-attuned energy was getting sucked in by a black hole, and the ball fractured while its energies were drawn inside. In just a moment, the core had absorbed the whole attack, and its golden half buzzed with energy.

Unfortunately, it was not all good news. There were limits to how much energy the core could contain, at least in its current state, and the absorption of the pure Dao of Life had pushed it to its limits. Worse yet, the balance between the two sides had become lopsided due to the lack of death-attuned energy.

It felt like when the core had just been formed, and there was a massive lack of life-attuned energy inside. However, now there was nothing for the core to absorb, and Zac sensed that it was getting more and more out of control.

He didn't know what would happen if the core got damaged or cracked, but he didn't want to find out. At the very least, it would cause massive damage, but it wasn't impossible it would deprive him of his second class. Or even kill him. He quickly took out one of his Miasma Crystals, but the rate of absorption was nowhere near what he needed.

The energy in the crystals was a lower grade compared to the real Dao of Life, and it was like he was trying to divert a river by throwing some gravel in the waters. Perhaps it would work after a while after he had absorbed enough crystals, but he sensed his core wouldn't be able to take it until then.

Out of options, Zac gritted his teeth and pushed straight toward the construct. It lifted its golden hand again, but Zac growled and launched a quick succession of Dao-empowered fractal blades at it, each aimed at the same spot.

Another golden shield erupted around the hand, but the force of a dozen blades was not something that even the construct could handle. The first handful of blades were cleanly absorbed by the shield, but at the seventh one,

it flickered and disappeared. The next two attacks actually landed right on the golden arm, pushing it away and causing some dents to form.

But just a second later, another golden shield was formed and started to absorb the remaining strikes. Luckily, Zac had already accomplished his goal at this point, and he was closing in on the thing while its golden arm was occupied. The black tentacle launched straight at him with terrifying speed, just as he had expected. Even though his mind screamed of danger, Zac chose to stand fast this time, allowing it to hit him square in his chest and throw him away.

Zac spat out a mouthful of blood and unsteadily got to his feet. His face was pale as a sheet as he sensed a horrible energy rampage through his body. It felt like his whole being was quickly withering away, but he forcibly ignored his decaying state, all his attention being on the Duplicity Core.

He was already in desperate straits, and his only idea was to fight fire with fire.

LIFE VERSUS DEATH

A wave of relief flooded Zac as he sensed that the Duplicity Core once again woke up and finally started to absorb the sinister energies that were coursing through his body. In just a second, it had absorbed it all, but Zac's body was still left in a state of disrepair.

Between the two attacks, his body felt beyond feeble, and he knew that he was running out of time. His core might have stabilized, but there was no way he would be able to absorb another set of those terrifying Dao-empowered strikes. Neither his body nor his core would be able to handle it.

He couldn't worry about whether there were any hidden components to this trial any longer, and he immediately started to charge up **[Nature's Punishment]** the moment that his core stabilized. It would take a few seconds, and the construct seemed to notice that something was up.

Extremely strong energies ripped through its body as it flashed forward at more than twice the speed compared to before, its black tentacle already hurtling toward him. Zac knew he had to stall for a bit longer, so he shot a fractal imbued with the Dao of Hardness at the tentacle as he backed away.

However, the fractal immediately withered and broke apart, even though it was imbued to be more resilient, and the attack kept moving toward him. When Zac saw what happened to the fractal, he suddenly had an idea, and he imbued the next **[Chop]** with the Dao of Trees. The edge flew toward the arm of death, and as he hoped, it didn't immediately break.

The two attacks clashed, neither gaining ground for a whole second. But soon enough, the Dao of Death seemed to finally whittle down the Dao of Trees, and the edge crumbled just like Zac's earlier attacks. The difference in efficacy between the two last attacks gave Zac a clue into the proper way to

deal with this trial, but he also realized it wouldn't work for him.

Luckily, the clash had bought enough time, and the familiar wooden hand emerged out of a crack in space above him. It rippled with the Dao of Trees since Zac believed he would hopefully be able to restrain the death-attuned side of the construct that way. Besides, apart from slightly restraining the Dao of Death, it also gave an all-round boost to the attack.

Zac wasted no time as he pushed the hand to slam straight down at the construct, and even though it erected a golden shield, it still was slapped like a fly down onto the ground. The attack didn't end there, as even though Zac's hand was burning from the golden shield, he still forced it to continue its trajectory and slam down onto the downed construct with tremendous force.

The next moment, the huge hand gripped the construct, though it barely managed to fit the whole thing in its hand. Zac used all his might to try to crush the golem in his hand, but the Life-Death Construct wasn't going down without a fight. Radiant flashes of both gold and black lit up the whole area, and the transmitted damage from the hand was almost enough for Zac to pass out.

The wooden hand was extremely resilient with the help of the Dao of Trees, and its power was unparalleled to anything else he could throw at his enemies. However, both the Daos that the construct possessed were extremely corrosive to the wooden hand. It was like a feedback loop was caused inside the hand where it was continuously pushed between life and death.

The pain was unbelievable, and Zac's eyes were completely bloodshot by this point, but he kept pressuring the construct with all his might. Creaking sounds of metal being torn and twisted could be heard until a wide shockwave containing concentrated Death erupted from the golem.

Luckily, most of the attack was blocked and absorbed by the hand, but the sudden burst of death was too much, and Zac was forced to release the attack. The hand was already disintegrating from the frantic retaliation of the construct, and the speed of its dissolution rapidly sped up when Zac decided to relinquish control.

His final action before he let the hand go was to throw the distorted metal into the ground once more, causing another shockwave to spread. He hoped that the construct was already destroyed from how dismal it looked, but he wouldn't bet his life on it.

As he looked at the unmoving scrap of metal in the crater, he saw that its

composition had undergone one more change from Zac's massive assault. The pitch-black metal had turned ashen gray, and it looked completely devoid of energy. He had completely destroyed the death-attuned half with the combination of brute force and the Dao of Trees.

However, he still couldn't breathe easily. While the other half of the construct was twisted and deformed, it still shone with the same golden luster as before. Worse yet, he could sense the Dao of Life inside it. Zac sighed in disappointment, but he readied himself for one more round.

Another hand was already emerging from a crack above him, even though such a rapid consumption of energy was pretty harmful to his body. This hand was imbued with the Dao of Heaviness though since it felt useless to fight against the life-attuned half of the construct with a worse version of its own element.

The construct was slowly rising from the crater as it smoothed out its deformed shape. But luckily, the gray area was still completely lifeless and showed no signs of regenerating. Zac felt empowered by the sight and roused the remaining energy in his body as he pushed the second hand straight at his enemy.

The wooden hand slammed into the construct like a falling meteor, the attack causing a far larger shockwave compared to the first punishment. The whole field that held the inheritance trial was cracking, making Zac wonder if the trial area would break apart from the battle.

Zac hesitantly looked at the crater to see whether his attack was effective, but some panic erupted when he sensed the familiar deluge of vitality flooding the wooden hand. The next moment, an almost blinding golden glow erupted from beneath the hand, almost completely swallowing it.

Zac quickly canceled the attack as he racked his brain for some way out. Would he have to take the Coward's Escape after all? But Zac gritted his teeth in stubbornness again, feeling the same unwillingness to back down as he'd felt in his battle with the Dominator. His eyes followed the movement of the construct as it once again picked itself up from the ground.

He had a feeling that no matter how many attacks he launched at the thing, it would keep regenerating as long as he didn't use a proper element for an attack. He needed to use death to vanquish life.

The construct was quickly returning to its original form as Zac's mind moved a mile a minute, trying to figure out a way to destroy that thing. Finally, he took out an E-grade Miasma Crystal and launched it straight at the

construct like he had done so many times with rocks to kill beasts.

The crystal ripped through the air like a bullet and slammed straight into the golden arm with enough power to push it back a few meters. The crystal itself exploded into thousands of splinters, but unfortunately, it didn't result in an explosion of death-attuned energy. Instead, the Miasma stored in the crystal simply spread out like a cloud, which didn't seem to particularly affect the construct.

Zac sighed in disappointment, but seeing the cloud of Miasma actually gave him an idea. He barely had time to formulate it as another ball of light started to shine inside the golden circle on his enemy's eye. This was no time to second-guess himself since if that ball hit him like the last one, he would likely die. He desperately moved his arm to his pouch, and the next moment an enormous monolith appeared in front of him.

It reached around ten meters into the air and was wrought from some cursed black stone. Zac had never been so close to an Unholy Beacon before, and he started to feel nauseated by the aura it emitted almost immediately. At the top of the monolith, a turquoise light radiated outward, and it had immediately started to convert the Cosmic Energy in the atmosphere.

Without waiting, Zac grabbed the base of the monolith. But to his dismay, he realized that he barely managed to lift the thing, and worse yet, he noticed that the attack by the construct was almost fully formed. Out of better options, he activated [**Hatchetman's Rage**], and with a roar properly lifted the Unholy Beacon as he started running with heavy steps toward the construct.

He didn't want to use this skill at first, afraid that other trials would await after this one. Undergoing another battle while weakened by the side effects of [**Hatchetman's Rage**] might prove lethal, so he'd wanted to avoid using it against the construct. But it was Hail Mary time.

Zac's muscles burned with strain, but the unnatural power and rage brought by the skill pushed him forward. An all-consuming desire for wanton destruction filled Zac's mind, and this time, he didn't try to curtail it. With a bestial roar he finally jumped up in the air, causing huge cracks to spread from where he stood.

The construct lifted its arm toward Zac, but he didn't care as he heedlessly swung the enormous monolith as though it were a club. A golden ball of life flew straight at him, but it was swallowed into the turquoise haze at the top of the pillar. Putting a ball of pure life into the conversion chamber

of an Unholy Beacon was clearly a pretty bad idea since extremely erratic energies immediately started to radiate from the monolith.

Zac sensed that the Unholy Beacon was highly unstable even in his muddled state, but he didn't care as he slammed the tip straight into the head of the Life-Death Construct in a thwunk that would make Billy proud. Life and death clashed in a blinding explosion, and Zac was thrown away like a ragdoll from the shockwave. Luckily, he activated **[Nature's Barrier]** at the last second, protecting him from some of the damage at least.

As he was falling, he felt a huge surge of Cosmic Energy entering his body, pushing him to level 74. He breathed in relief since that meant the construct was truly destroyed and the gambit had worked out.

He remembered that both Ogras and Karunthel had told him that it was possible to turn the Unholy Beacons into weapons, which made him try to use it against the large life-attuned golem. They might not have meant such a direct method of utilization, but at least it worked out in the end.

Zac knew that there must be some strong death-attuned item inside the monoliths to be able to continuously turn Cosmic Energy into Miasma, and his gambit was that it would cause proper damage in contrast to the Miasma Crystal.

A groan escaped his mouth as Zac slammed into the ground, every part of his body aching. But without giving himself a breather, he got back on his feet and quickly ate a top-tier healing pill as he scanned the surroundings for any change.

He wasn't necessarily safe just because he had destroyed the construct.

He quickly spotted that one thing had changed after he had destroyed the construct. The field the battle had taken place in had been surrounded by a gray haze since he arrived, but in one direction, the shroud had given way to a path that led away from this place. However, Zac ignored the path for now as he walked over to the crater with the broken monolith.

The clash between life and death had quickly snuffed out each other, but not before it had utterly destroyed the area. Zac looked into the pit and sighed in disappointment when he looked at the mangled remains of the Life-Death Construct. The pattern on its chest had been a great clue to the path he wanted to walk, but it was demolished from his attacks.

In the end, he put both the broken Beacon and the crumpled remains of the construct into his Cosmos Sack, but instead of heading over to the exit, he instead sat down and started to absorb energy from an E-grade Nexus Crystal.

A few seconds later, a huge wave of weakness hit him as the effect from **[Hatchetman's Rage]** ran out.

He realized that one more positive effect of either his improved Vitality or Endurance was that the side effect of the berserker skill had become far more manageable compared to before, though he still wouldn't want to start another fight in his current condition.

But he wasn't completely out of it like before, so instead of heading to the next stage, he took out one of his Dao Treasures as soon as he felt his state was somewhat stable. Time was of the essence while the pattern and the construct's attacks were fresh in his mind, and without hesitation, he swallowed it and closed his eyes.

He knew the next step he needed to take on his Dao Path.

THE LORD OF CYCLES

Zac actually gained two insights from the past fight, and he was eager to try to formalize at least one of them while the feeling was fresh. That was why he immediately went into meditation as soon as his body allowed it.

However, he did not ponder upon the Dao of Trees, even though he had a hint of the direction he wanted to take that Dao Seed. Pushing a Dao Seed to the peak was no easy matter, and he felt he needed some more time to prepare before he tried to push the seed to the limit. The hints he had gained from the Dao of Life was great, but it was just a start.

Zac was instead focusing on something completely new. He was planning to attain a Dao Seed that he hadn't gained a Dao Vision for. Every Dao Seed so far had been attained through his class skills, but he had realized that there was one component he was missing.

Ever since Zac had gained his second class, he had been thinking about creating a holistic "build" for himself, one that focused on building both great offense and defense through his classes. He would empower them with both Life and Death, and he would use the axe to launch devastating attacks containing these concepts. He had a far-off vision of combining it all into an invincible power.

There were still many question marks of how he would fit everything together, and the fight just now had proven that he had been thinking too much inside the box. He had felt that the Dao of Trees and later the Dao of Life were useless for offense against anything except the undead, but that clearly wasn't the case.

That glowing ball had been terrifying, and if he didn't possess the core to absorb the damage, he would have exploded from one attack, even though he

possessed over 700 Endurance. But there was one realization that was more important than any other: he was lacking a Dao Seed that could eventually evolve into the Dao of Death. He had no opposite for the Dao of Life.

He had always considered the Miasma as the part representing death, but in the end, it was only the equivalent of Cosmic Energy. His Undying Bulwark class was also a class purely focused on defense, and Zac didn't believe that he would gain any more Dao Visions from it. He would rather unearth more improvements to Hardness and Sanctuary through the extremely profound vision.

That meant that he needed to adjust his toolkit a bit. He needed another seed that could be the complement to the Dao of Trees. In the long run, it would hopefully allow him to become truly powerful, and in the short run, it would help him get through this inheritance. He couldn't slam an unholy beacon onto everything that barred his path, after all.

Luckily, he believed he had gained enough clues through being undead and from his time in the inheritance to formalize another Dao Seed. He based it upon the hints that he had gotten from the monument before it had turned into the construct. A second fractal had slightly lit up from the Dao of Trees that had felt rotting and decaying, and that was exactly what he was going for. His mind focused on the feeling of life faltering, exuberant life slowly giving in to decay and finally death.

The Dao Treasure had put him into a trance, and he felt he was on the cusp of grasping the kernel of truth that would allow him to gain a seed. Zac didn't know how much time passed as he held fast to the images of faltering life and the unstoppable decay of anything living.

But just as he felt he was about to grasp the Dao Seed, the trance ended, and he opened his eyes with frustration. He knew that it never was a good idea to force the Dao, but he was so close that he could taste it. So Zac reluctantly swallowed a second Dao treasure and once again closed his eyes.

Finally, everything clicked, and he sensed a mysterious energy appearing in his body. Zac had initially thought that it would either add itself to one of the three Dao Fractals in his body or create a new one, but instead, it simply formed a small seed in a separate space located in Zac's mind.

Zac could only guess that it was because this was a seed that was naturally formed by himself without the assistance of a skill, but he would have to investigate whether he needed to somehow create a fractal to house it later. Since he was done, he quickly opened his status screen in anticipation,

and as he expected, he saw the sixth Dao Seed of his.

[Rot (Early): Wisdom +10, Intelligence +5]

This was exactly what Zac had aimed for, though he was a bit disappointed the attributes did not really suit him. The Wisdom would help him with his resilience against mental attacks, but he still hadn't found any use for Intelligence for either of his classes.

As he sensed the seed in his mind, he was certain that the fractal that he had slightly lit up was the Dao of Rot. His Dao of Trees slightly encompassed the concept of life through death, and Rot was placed right on the crossroads between these two concepts.

He hoped that he could lead the Dao of Rot toward the direction of death through life, and with the Dao of Trees form a complete cycle. But for now, it was a simple Early-stage Dao Seed that he guessed would add some corrosive effects on his attacks.

Zac quickly summoned a fractal edge with **[Chop]**, and just as he thought, the fractal gained a murky green color when it was imbued with the Seed of Rot. Unfortunately, there wasn't anything living in the area that he could test it out on, so he simply attacked the ground.

There was no added power to the fractal edge, and the scar that was created by the swing didn't corrode as though it were attacked by acid. However, a wet sheen of some green liquid was left around the rift, meaning that the attack was more akin to adding poison to the blade. It would be useless against inorganic things, but it might contain surprising power against living enemies.

Flush with success, Zac considered taking another Dao Treasure in hopes of pushing his Dao of Trees forward as well, but in the end, he forced himself to calm down. His instincts told him that he was too far away from being able to push the seed to its peak, and he probably wouldn't reach it even if he ate all three of his Dao Treasures.

Zac checked his watch, and to his surprise, seven hours had already passed. It was more time than Zac had planned on spending inside the inheritance in total, but there was no getting around it. At least they knew he was still alive since he maintained his position on the ladder. He had also gained a level, so they should understand that he was in a battle of some kind.

The weakness from using **[Hatchetman's Rage]** during the battle had already passed, and his Cosmic Energy was mostly full thanks to his passive absorption of energy during his meditation. So Zac didn't waste any more

time and immediately headed toward the passage.

He held [**Verun's Bite**] ready in his hand, prepared for any kind of situation. But the passageway was completely barren, with not a single object or being in sight. It was only fifteen minutes later that the scene changed, and Zac stared wide-eyed at the world in front of him.

Paradise. That was the only thing that Zac could think of as he looked at the lush atmosphere around him. The hazy mists had given way to an exquisite field where each and every strand of grass seemed to be meticulously crafted to give a sense of beauty and harmony.

Small rivers were running through the fields of flowers, and various small pagodas and patios were placed along the field. Even more miraculously, there were floating islands drifting about in the sky above him, each of them connected by steps wrought from fire and ice.

It slightly reminded him of the vision of the floating cultivation palaces in his vision with the axe-man, though these islands were far smaller and rather seemed to be there for aesthetic reasons. It was like someone had wanted to create a multilayered garden and had even bent the laws of nature to make it happen.

There was no sun in the sky, but instead, there was a beautiful night sky unblemished and undiminished by any light pollution. Yet everything was completely illuminated thanks to a huge moon spreading a silver luster over the area, which added a mystical and dreamlike ambiance to the scenery.

But Zac wouldn't relax just because the scene was breathtaking, and he hesitantly proceeded with his axe at the ready. He strained his mind to find any clues of hidden traps or arrays, but he couldn't sense anything. He couldn't even sense any Cosmic Energy being used to keep the islands afloat, which made him question whether he was stuck in an illusion.

That, of course, raised the question of where the inheritance actually took place. Was this whole zone even real, or did it all take place in some dreamscape? But Zac's instincts told him it was real, as it would be odd if he was able to gain a Dao Seed and gain a level while asleep.

"I had some hopes, but alas." A sad sigh suddenly came from one of the islands above. "You fail."

It was the same voice that had spoken at the start of the trial, and Zac's heart lurched when he heard its proclamation. Had he really failed the inheritance because he used brute force to kill the construct earlier? But there was simply no other way for him to pull through.

The idea was to use death to snuff out the life and life to overcome death, but he didn't possess either of those elements in a way that he could properly utilize them in a fight. In the end, he could only win with the help of overwhelming might.

"You are far too ugly to even become an honorary disciple of mine. I might be dead, but I'm not that desperate," the voice continued with an unmistakable note of disdain, and Zac's blood pressure immediately spiked.

The way of speaking was way too similar to a certain Tool Spirit, and Zac started wondering if Brazla had somehow weaseled himself into the trial. The voice was different, but Zac saw no reason that Brazla should be stuck to one voice since he wasn't technically a living being. Zac quickly ran up the shimmering ladders toward the floating island that he heard the voice come from.

The sceneries on the islands were even more exquisite than on the ground, but he had no time to admire them as he hurried up toward the top. His anger had even made him forget the very real possibility that there were hidden tests on the islands, but luckily, it seemed that he had already passed the only trial at this stage.

Zac was ready to blast off a tirade at the arrogant Tool Spirit, but the moment he reached the top, his words got stuck in his throat as he stopped in his tracks.

It felt like he had arrived at the garden of a fairy-tale castle, where every detail shone with beauty and perfection. Hundreds of different types of flowers that all had their own unique charms spread out in a seemingly haphazard manner across the island, but somehow there was order to the chaos.

A small pond was placed in the middle, and a brook that ran through it gave off a soothing sound. However, neither the flowers nor the brook was as striking as the celestial form of the Lord of Cycles sitting and basking in the moonlight. Where the statue had depicted a fine-chiseled but androgynous male, Zac saw a picture-perfect beauty in front of him.

He looked like he was chiseled by a master artisan as he looked up at the moon with a sorrowful gaze, one hand outreached as though trying to grasp it, with the other held over his heart. It was a scene of frailty and longing, and the silver light of the moon gave it a haunting feeling.

"Don't fall in love with me, child," the Lord of Cycles said with a long-suffering sigh as he turned his limpid eyes toward the gaping Zac.

But suddenly, Zac realized there was a sense of wrongness, and with a grunt, he pushed **[Mental Fortress]** to the limit. The result wasn't reality cracking, showing him that he had escaped an illusion. But everything he saw shifted somewhat.

The flowers, the brook, and the pond were still there, as was the Lord of Cycles, but while the environment was beautiful, it was not enough to gobsmack him any longer. And the man in front of him was no longer the personification of perfection, but rather a somewhat feminine man who wore a robe that might be mistaken for a dress.

Everything about him was ambiguous, from his hairstyle to his choice of clothes, but that wasn't what terrified Zac. That was some extremely scary illusion he had been put inside. What would have happened if he hadn't noticed something was wrong? Would he have become the lover of a long-dead ghost?

Zac's back was immediately drenched in cold sweat, and he thanked the stars that he had gained some experience in spotting illusions from his time in the hunt. The being in front of him was clearly not completely benign, and his vigilance rose to the peak to protect his mind and his butt.

"Tsch, so you broke my beautification field? How boring," the man muttered and swapped out his elaborate pose to a more laid-back one. "So you are the one who passed the first inheritance trial? As I said, your face is pretty pathetic; I can't take you as a disciple. Not that I was planning to take one in any case."

MORTALS AND CULTIVATORS

Zac was starting to regret choosing the Lord of Cycles rather than the Undying Fiend inheritance. This person was almost as bad as Brazla. Or had perhaps all the predecessors gone crazy stuck with the Tool Spirit for those untold ages? If that was the case, then the inheritances might be useless.

He'd barely survived his trial, and he was far stronger than anyone else on the island. How could he in good conscience let his sister enter the trial for the Invoker if this was how it was going to be? But still, Zac had pushed through the trial, and he wasn't ready to give up just yet.

"I'm sorry, I can't do much about my face, but I guess it'll get better as my race ranking improves. Why did you set this place up if you didn't want to find inheritors?" Zac probed.

"Because of that stupid Brazla," the man said as he leisurely ran his fingers through the pond. "I needed him to create something for me, and he wanted me to set this place up as payment."

"Brazla?" Zac asked with confusion. "You made a deal with the Tool Spirit?"

"That little spirit is not Brazla," the man said with a chuckle. "It has just confused its own identity with his creator and ours over the years. Brazla was a Peak D-grade artificer, and he also called himself the Celestial Artisan. That a D-grade cultivator dared call himself that tells you all you need to know about his temperament."

Zac's brows rose in surprise from that little tidbit. He finally understood why the Tool Spirit acted so haughty. It had taken various traits from the eight predecessors, including his own master's. And if Zac were a betting man, he guessed that the narcissism came from the individual in front of him.

“So you made a deal with the real Brazla. He created something for you, and you set up an inheritance. Why did he want to create this place? And may I ask what your name is?” Zac probed.

“Money isn’t enough to create a true Heritage for a clan. Brazla was rich, but money can only buy unimpressive and widely distributed skills and cultivation manuals. Things that might take you to early D-grade but leave you with a pitiful core that can’t evolve,” the man said with a disdainful snort. “And my name is Yrial, so you can call me Lord Yrial or Beauty Yrial.”

Zac really wanted to roll his eyes, but he held himself in check since Yrial seemed pretty capricious. Who knew how he would react if Zac did something that he considered disrespectful.

“So why not go to someone else? Don’t you need to cut off a piece of your soul to create an inheritance?” Zac probed.

“Do you think it’s that easy to hire skilled craftsmen that are at Peak D-grade or C-grade? They are extremely scarce, and most are snatched up by superior forces. Rogue cultivators such as myself can’t hire them no matter how beautiful we are. Most of the craftsmen who remain unattached had no foundation to speak of, and were only able to eke out a living crafting low-grade items. Brazla was one of the few master artisans not beholden to a force, partly because of his temper partly the fact he was obsessed with creating a force of his own for some reason,” Yrial explained.

Zac frowned when hearing that. He was hoping to hire a blacksmith to create a real Spiritual Tool Shield for him, but if things were as Yrial said, it might be harder than he expected. Still, that was a problem for later. He first needed to make this narcissist cough up some valuables.

“Well, anyway. I’m here now. I proved my cycle, and I defeated the construct,” Zac tentatively said.

“Don’t you think I don’t know your so-called cycle is fake? Those fractals shouldn’t have lit up at all.” Yrial snorted as he threw Zac a disdainful glance. “But I have to admit, using the spy core for such a thing is pretty novel. I’m not sure what you encountered to allow your Duplicity Core to work like that.”

“Spy core?” Zac asked with confusion.

“That’s what the Duplicity Core usually is used for. You take the race of those you wish to spy on. But usually, you shouldn’t get a true copy as you have, but rather a watered-down version that doesn’t really provide any

bonus attributes. For some reason, your variant seems a lot stronger,” Yrial said with a shrug. “Even I can’t understand the fractals covering the core.”

Zac wasn’t too surprised that the ghost knew about his situation. He had been probed by that monument just a few hours before, and he guessed that whatever the monument found out, so did the Lord of Cycles.

“I did some research on it when I was exploring my path since it contains the potential for duality,” the ghost added. “But in the end, I didn’t feel it was a good fit.”

“What do you think caused the difference with my core?” Zac eagerly said.

It appeared that this man was far more knowledgeable about his Specialty Core than anyone he’d met so far. And if the construct was any indication, it was pretty likely that Yrial might be able to help him fuse his classes, or at least improve upon the core.

“Who knows?” the Lord of Cycles said with disinterest. “The Multiverse is full of odd chances and miraculous things. Almost everyone who reaches any distance on the path of cultivation has survived some insurmountable odds and encountered some strange opportunities. You made your Specialty Core much better than normal, which is good but not a miracle of the ages.”

Zac slowly nodded, though he wasn’t really sure what to believe. Greatest seemed to have been of another opinion, and Zac truly felt that getting two classes was a pretty huge deal. He was more inclined to believe that the man in front of him downplayed or simply didn’t understand the greatness of his Duplicity Core. Or perhaps nothing that wasn’t related to himself could enter his eyes.

“So, I might not be what you’re looking for in a disciple, but I still passed the test,” Zac said, focusing on what was important. “I should be given some treasures, right?”

“I guess,” the man grumbled, and reluctantly got to his feet. “It’s not like I need any of the things stored here in any case. Come here and let me sense your talent.”

Zac was elated and hurried over. Yrial indicated for him to hold out his hand, and it looked like he was going to inspect him directly. However, the moment before their hands touched, the spirit seemed to have a change of heart and first conjured a napkin to place over Zac’s hand.

Even Zac was starting feel pissed off at the treatment. Was his hand that disgusting that a damn spirit needed some extra layers of separation? But he

held his tongue since he knew that this was not the last time he would see this infuriating ghost. He would also administer future trials when he reached the E-grade and higher.

So he endured the injustice as he waited for the spirit to finish his inspection. Zac didn't know exactly what Yrial was looking for, but he guessed it had something to do with the Dao runes he'd lit up. Perhaps he was trying to choose which category of impartment would suit him best.

Zac started to get worried as the frown on Yrial's face only deepened the longer he held Zac's hand. Soon he even felt some powerful pressure bear down on him, and he caught a glimpse of an extremely vast aura from the spirit.

It was tightly controlled, but it was far beyond the impressions he'd had of both Greatest and the Great Redeemer. He didn't know why, but it felt like he was pressured by the weight of a world when he felt the aura. That proved that the man in front of him had truly been an existence of a higher tier once upon a time, even though he was pretty annoying.

"This is unbelievable," Yrial finally said and looked at Zac with wonder.

Zac looked up at the spirit, suddenly filled with anticipation. Perhaps he had realized how special his core was, or that his body was far stronger than normal due to his numerous titles. Making a good impression would perhaps help him gain better treasures and guidance.

"You are beyond trash. You have absolutely no talent in any way, manner, or form. How are you even alive?" he said as he looked at Zac like he was a zoo animal. "I don't know whether to call you ultimate garbage or a genius."

"I know I'm a mortal," Zac said with gritted teeth, stabilizing his heart from the emotional free fall it had just endured. "But I have been plugging along just fine until now. And with my special core, I don't think I'll be worse off than any cultivator, even if my road will be bumpier."

"No, you don't understand," Yrial said with a shake of his head. "This goes beyond being a mortal. I knew you were a trashy mortal the moment you stepped inside my trial."

"Then what do you mean?" Zac asked, exasperated.

"Do you know what the difference between a mortal and a cultivator is? Apart from the obvious," Yrial said as he conjured up a divan to lie down on, making Zac shake his head.

"Being a cultivator is having a certain amount of affinity with the deeper

truths of the universe. Some call it spirituality,” Yrial said as he formed a ball of burning ice in his hand. “However, it’s not a binary situation where you either have it or you don’t.

“Simply put, you can have various affinities with all the Daos, and you need a minimum affinity with at least one Dao to become a cultivator. Let’s say that an affinity is a number. Someone with an affinity of 120 to an element will have an easier time learning that Dao than someone with an affinity of 80,” Yrial continued as a second ball, this one frozen fire, appeared next to the earlier ball.

“Some races have extremely high affinities with certain Daos, essentially turning their whole population in a certain direction of cultivation. But many races, like us humans, don’t have any racial affinity,” he continued as the two balls started to dance around in his hand. “I am a supreme genius who showed an extremely good affinity with both fire and ice, which is why I embarked upon my path. But most people aren’t talented enough in any element that they would choose their class by their affinities. They simply get whatever class they get,” Yrial continued, not forgetting to toot his own horn.

“No one knows the exact cut-off, but let’s say the minimum to be able to control Cosmic Energy and push it through their pathways according to a cultivation manual to be 50, no matter which element.

“This means that both someone with an affinity of 60 and 160 will be cultivators, though the one with the higher affinity might have an easier time pondering the Dao and breaking through the smaller bottlenecks,” Yrial continued. “Most also have multiple affinities, though not as high as myself. Apart from fire and ice, I also have an affinity with dozens of other Daos, though I don’t focus on them.

“Choosing a path that both fits with your affinities and your personality is the best way to go as far as possible when it comes to cultivation. That’s why children are tested when young.”

Zac thought back to Emily, and how Alyn and Alea had tested her to confirm her great talent for cultivation. This was no news for him, but it was interesting to learn that nothing was completely clear-cut.

“In the same way, mortals can both have an affinity of 20 and 40. Both are trash, but different degrees of trash. And the one with an affinity of 40 will have an easier time of forcing open nodes or turning into a low-grade cultivator in the future,” Yrial continued.

“So what’s my affinity?” Zac said, already having an inkling of the

answer going by Yrial's earlier reaction.

"Zero. No affinity at all, not to any element, which technically shouldn't be possible. Cosmic Energy is the basic building block of the universe, and it should be impossible to at least not have a small connection to it," Yrial said. "Especially you who have already walked on the path of cultivation for a while. Yet I can't find a speck of spirituality in your body."

"I seem to have pressed on fine, though?" Zac asked hesitantly. "I even have a pretty good tolerance of energy. I can absorb crystals pretty damn quick even without being a cultivator. And I have formed multiple Dao Seeds."

"That's what's so mind-boggling," Yrial said with wonder. "You're ugly, but you are pretty interesting. Perhaps your weird trashy constitution might even be an opportunity."

"How is it an opportunity to have no talent?" Zac asked with a helpless smile.

"Because you are free. We're all prisoners to the System, playing within its rule set. The System won't let you choose a class that is not in line with your talents since that would statistically lower the chance for you to become a powerhouse. And that's just one of the ways the System limits the boundless Dao. But you who have no talents are unfettered, able to do anything," Yrial said, growing more and more excited.

"I've decided today is your lucky day. I'll lower myself to make you my disciple after all," the Lord of Cycles said, truly looking like he was throwing Zac a bone. "Hurry, kneel down and accept me as your master!"

BEAUTY AND BRAWN

“Now you want to make me your disciple?” Zac asked with hesitation since the situation seemed a bit fishy. “I thought I was too ugly? Also, I’m not really interested in kneeling.”

“Well, you are a bit ugly, but I’ll make an exception. A super trash who’s also a progenitor and having two classes through a variant core? It’s too interesting to pass up,” the Lord of Cycles said with excitement. “And the kneeling is just figurative, though there is one thing you need to do to become my disciple.”

Zac frowned at the explanation. It almost sounded like the Lord of Cycles wanted to take him as a disciple as a novelty. But he was long dead, so why did he bother about these things? And what would a shady person like Yrial have him do to become a disciple?

There had been too much new information in too short a time. He didn’t even know if Yrial was telling the truth about his aptitude, and there was no way for him to double-check. But something inside him was telling him that he wasn’t lying, and his mind immediately went to his mother.

Was this what she had done to him? Or was this simply the constitution of a Technocrat, someone who hated the System. Various emotions flitted through his mind as he tried to fathom why she would do something like this. Kenzie’s AI he could understand, even if it put her in extreme danger. It would undoubtedly help her get further on the road of cultivation than if she didn’t possess it.

But why would Leandra want to give him an awful constitution like this?

“Let’s just say I’m taking a chance here. I only have one shot unless I set up another trial ground after I made this place. Your combination of unique

traits might lead nowhere, but it might also turn into something amazing. So if you make it big, remember to resurrect me,” Yrial suddenly added, perhaps afraid the silence was due to Zac not wanting to become a disciple.

“Resurrect?” Zac gaped. “Is that even possible?”

“As long as you reach the peak of cultivation, you can resurrect people as long as you possess a piece of their original soul or at least know where they died. Luckily, I am such a piece.” The Lord of Cycles nodded. “Though from what I’ve heard, it is extremely taxing, so even the most powerful people in the Multiverse can only do it a handful of times.

“Resurrection and immortality are two of the most common reasons people push themselves toward the peak. Who doesn’t have friends and loved ones who have fallen? This only becomes more poignant as you get stronger and the millennia pass.” Yrial sighed. “Some of my companions fell to battle; others due to old age since they got stuck and couldn’t progress. The road of cultivation is paved with not only the bones of your enemies but also your loved ones.

“The only reason this place was created was that I needed Brazla to create a specialized item that I required for an expedition into an unexplored B-grade Mystic Realm. Since I never came back to update this place, I am guessing I died inside,” he said with surprising equanimity. “Such is fate when defying the heavens. Anyone can die at any time.”

Zac’s thoughts immediately went to his father. Was it actually possible to bring him back if he got powerful enough? Or if he got stuck due to being a mortal, then perhaps Kenzie could do it.

“Of course, even with your odd advantages, reaching even B-grade is a dream within a dream, so don’t start planning who to resurrect just yet,” Yrial added with some disdain, clearly understanding what Zac was thinking about.

“Why should I accept you as a master, though?” Zac hesitantly said. “What benefits do I get apart from just getting the inheritance treasures?”

“If you decide to only become an inheritor, I’ll just throw some treasure at you and then kick you out. Since I’ll be pretty pissed off, the treasure might not be too exciting,” the spirit said without an inkling of shame. “But if you become my disciple, I’ll go above and beyond to help you each time you enter here. I’ll not only help you progress, but I’ll also give you the best treasures I’ve got stocked here.”

Zac looked at the spirit with some helplessness, as he knew that he couldn’t say no to such an offer, even if there were some hidden

considerations behind Yrial's offer. Getting the guidance of a C-grade powerhouse was something extremely valuable for someone like him. But he didn't immediately say yes since he did have other considerations.

"There is a rogue cultivator believed to be at Peak D-grade heading toward my home world to enslave it. Are you able to help out against that?" he tentatively asked.

"I can kill him for you if you manage to get him inside here. D-grade warriors have only taken the first step on cultivation; it's nothing I can't handle, even in this limited form. But I don't see how it's possible for you to bring him here," the spirit said with an unconcerned shrug. "So you would be better off putting me and the repository in a portable mansion and fleeing to another planet."

Zac sighed in disappointment, but it was worth a try.

"I plan to find a force in the Multiverse that can protect my planet from that man. Would that conflict with becoming your disciple?" Zac asked next.

"Of course not; most walking on the path of cultivation will have many teachers and benefactors throughout their lives. There's no point in trying to reinvent the wheel all by yourself. Some puritans think that taking pointers from others would impact their path of cultivation, but that's only true if their path is fragile and built on unstable foundations," Yrial said. "But you should also be ready that you might not be as sought after as you hope without exposing your secrets," the Lord of Cycles added. "Taking someone on as a disciple is a huge risk and a drain on resources. Both the risk and the drain is multiplied a hundredfold when you're a mortal. Bringing a mortal to the D-grade can bankrupt a D-grade sect, and that's just the start."

"So I should display my core?" Zac probed.

"I wouldn't recommend it. Between your odd body and your variation core, you would be lucky to last for a month before someone decided to cut you open. Your situation might not be very interesting for peak existences, but it would certainly be even for some C-grade beings. If I weren't dead, I would already have cut you open to study that core," Yrial said.

"You'd really do something like that?" Zac asked with shock.

"That's nothing. You don't understand how hard it is to progress after the D-grade. You can spend thousands of years without being able to take a single step forward. If your unique constitution even gave me a minuscule chance of advancing, I'd rip you apart in a heartbeat. Those lofty existences from elite families wouldn't be any different either, even if they pretend

otherwise,” Yrial said.

Cold sweat started to run down Zac’s back when he saw the ruthless determination within Yrial’s eyes, and it reminded him of the stark reality. Might made right in this world, and he was wrong to consider people like the Great Redeemer as crazy outliers. There were innumerable people who were ready to do anything to progress on their path of cultivation.

“In any case, what do I need to do to become your disciple?” Zac said, eager to change the subject from his dismemberment.

“Just a small test. I admit I slightly phoned in the challenge for this trial. I mean, I simply bought and modified a Dao Golem. But in my defense, I did not really want to do this thing, so I was annoyed,” Yrial said with a straight face. “But I did put in another small test in case I actually found someone acceptable to take on as a disciple.”

“Weren’t you already ready to accept me?” Zac hesitantly asked. “Is there really a need for another trial?”

“Well, perhaps not if I were still alive, but I am a construct now.” Yrial snickered. “I am created by a set of rules that I cannot bend. To become a disciple, you must pass my test for disciples. Don’t worry; seeing your strength, you should survive. Though I admit the trial tests not only your brawn but also your beauty, which might be a problem for you.”

Alarms started to go off in Zac’s mind, and he quickly turned around to run away. The trial for discipleship sounded extremely suspicious, and he wanted no part of it. Especially when he mentioned the risk of death.

“Naïve.” The Lord of Cycles simply laughed, and with a wave of his arm, Zac was lifted up and brought back to where he stood earlier.

“No, wait!” Zac shouted, but it was too late, as an odd wave was released from an amulet around Yrial’s neck.

Zac helplessly glared at the man waving him goodbye from his spot by the pond until the scenery started to blur around him. Were all old ghosts scammers in the end?

Zac didn’t have time to complain about the similarly shady methods of Anzonil and Yrial as the odd pressure continued to build up in his mind. He had already realized that he was being put inside a dreamscape or an illusion so that the trial wouldn’t take place in reality. Zac tried to resist the growing confusion with all his might, even activating **[Mental Fortress]**.

But the might of the illusion wrought by a C-grade powerhouse wasn’t something he could resist, and his defensive skill was effortlessly broken

through by whatever Yrial did. Ceaseless information was crammed into his mind, and he realized it was memories from when Yrial was young. There was a flood of impressions and sights, and Zac started to become unsure who he even was until he finally blacked out.

Zac shook his head with a groan before looking around to see where he was. He was currently sitting in a camp in a forest, though the trees were a bit different from anything he had seen on Earth. It was the middle of winter, and the barren trees were covered in a layer of snow. However, he didn't move and instead tried to sort out the new information in his head.

The confusion he'd felt during the impartment had abated, and he knew that he was Zac and that he was inside a dream trial for discipleship. Nothing he saw around him was actually real. But the problem was the parting words of Yrial. Even though this place was an illusion, it appeared there was a distinct risk of death.

The place he found himself in was modeled after a real place, and it was the home world of the Lord of Cycles. The forest around him had no name, and it was simply part of the untamed wilderness that spanned between the established influences in the area.

Zac quickly opened up his status screen, and it was with some relief that he found that all his attributes and skills were intact. **[Verun's Bite]** was also by his side, though his own Cosmos Sack had been replaced by a much worse one with only some simple necessities and a few Nexus Crystals inside.

Zac wasn't too worried, though, since he believed that the object was to finish the trial without the assistance of his vast wealth. He had to admit that he had taken a shortcut with the Unholy Beacon, and Yrial perhaps didn't want such a thing to happen again. His real Cosmos Sack was no doubt still with his real body inside the trial.

He was also curious to note that he had gotten an actual quest this time around rather than just being thrown into the ring against the Life-Death Construct. Even the type of quest was new, meaning discipleship might not be something as simple as a verbal agreement between two people.

Fire and Ice (Unique, Discipleship): Acquire a Profound Yin Orchid and a Ruby of Everlasting Yang. Reward: Discipleship of the Lord of Cycles. (0/2). Remaining: 04:23:58:23

Zac blanked out for a second as he looked at the quest. He had no clue

what those two things were, but he soon found them inside the added memories from Yrial's youth. And the more he looked through the memories, the worse his face got. How the hell was he supposed to finish this quest?

It truly was a test of beauty and brawn.

PROFOUND YIN AND EVERLASTING YANG

It seemed like a straightforward enough task, but Zac groaned inwardly when he saw it. The burst of information he had received included all the information he needed regarding the two treasures, and Zac knew this quest would be a pain in the ass.

Neither of the treasures were readily available. The Profound Yin Orchid was a top-tier E-grade flower that gave an enormous boost to the Ice-attributed cultivation manual that the disciples of the Profound Yin Sect in the area used. It was so integral to them that they even named their sect after it, and the gardens containing the flowers were strictly guarded deep inside the core of their sect.

The Profound Yin Sect was nothing special in the Multiverse, but its ancestor was a high-level E-grade cultivator. All its elders were between the Low- and Mid-grade E-grade as well, and their force was not something Zac could handle, even if he went all out.

Interestingly enough, the Profound Yin Sect was exclusively a female sect, and any association with males was strictly prohibited. There was no way for Zac to simply walk up to the sect in order to trade with them, as he would be attacked on sight. Not that they would ever sell their core resource anyway.

The situation with the Rubies of Everlasting Yang was pretty much the same. They only slowly grew inside a volcano sitting atop a Nexus Vein, and it was strictly controlled by the Everlasting Yang Sect. The sect was the exact opposite of the Profound Yin, and only fire-attributed males could join the sect.

The two sects were actually located quite close to each other, and not

surprisingly, there was nonstop contention between the two forces. Since both the sects were of roughly the same strength, neither was able to root out the other, and it seemed like the elders of both the sects used the conflict as a whetstone to hone their disciples.

The mission was a replication of a feat that the Lord of Cycles had accomplished when he was roughly the same level as Zac himself. In fact, Yrial had been a lot weaker in terms of total attributes and power when he'd stolen the two treasures in short succession.

The memories that Zac had received while he fell into the dreamscape even went so far as to give him a few partial memories of how Yrial had managed to snatch the two treasures, and the method Yrial used was the reason Zac was so vexed. A test of beauty and brawn was an apt description.

He had actually openly infiltrated the Profound Yin Sect. He had utilized his ambiguous looks by ambushing a Profound Yin disciple who was out hunting beasts in the woods, and then stolen her disciple's uniform. With that in hand, he simply waltzed into the gates, looking like a woman. He even used an early version of his beatification field to gain access to the garden from the presiding elder.

Getting the ruby was a lot simpler. Yrial had walked up to the Everlasting Yang Sect, proclaiming that he had beaten a core disciple of the Profound Yin Sect in a duel, showing the orchid as proof. From there, he taunted the disciples of the Everlasting Yang Sect until one of their own core disciples stepped forward, putting a ruby as the wager.

The core disciple was stronger than Yrial in reality, but the Lord of Cycles once again used his beatification field to confuse the poor disciple, and then Yrial ruthlessly attacked him while his emotions were in turmoil.

It was not much later that his trickery had been exposed, and he was summarily hunted by both the sects for a good while. Zac's imparted memories stopped there, though, and he didn't know how the story ended. However, since Yrial had become a C-grade Monarch in the end, he had clearly gotten away.

Zac understood why Yrial had taken the risk. He had already started walking on the path of fire and ice, the two concepts that would allow him to reach the Peak C-grade in the end. But he was a poor rogue cultivator, and getting his hands on those two treasures was his idea to push both his Daos forward.

Both of them helped a cultivator foster a constitution that was especially

suiting for the cultivation of their respective element. Zac guessed that Yrial later combined the two to create the foundation of a real fire-and-ice constitution.

The problem for Zac was that there was no way for him to replicate Yrial's feat. At least not in the same way. There was no way he would be able to pass as a woman, even with the help of **[Thousand Faces]**. There were limits to the skill, and it was not possible to change enough to pass as a woman except perhaps from a great distance.

He believed he could replicate the second half of the mission, though he would be able to defeat the core disciple without the use of trickery. He had accompanied Brazla enough to know how to enrage a few cultivators, but he knew that they wouldn't offer a ruby for the wager unless he could put up one of the orchids.

A large part of the reason they were ready to duel Yrial was that they desperately wanted to succeed where the Profound Yin failed in a game of one-upmanship. If they could show the world that they had one of the prized possessions of their rival sects, it would no doubt make their enemies lose a lot of face.

Finding another treasure to wager instead was out of the question as well. The time limit was pretty restrictive, and he would only have time to visit the sects one by one with little room for leeway. Since time was of the essence, Zac would simply take it step by step.

That in itself was a problem for Zac, who was already running late for his real-life obligations. He was supposed to go to Westfort today, but he might be stuck inside this place for another few days. However, Zac suddenly had an idea as he sat down and started to ponder upon his Daos.

But no matter what he did or which Dao he pondered upon, everything was just a haze in his mind. It was like he had lost one of his senses, where the truths of the world were completely blocked to him or even missing. Zac wasn't worried, though, but quite satisfied with the results.

Being unable to improve one's Dao could be indicative of time dilation. Since the Dao of Time was a thing, creating spaces that had a different flow of time was quite possible. However, no matter whether you sped up time or slowed it down, it was essentially impossible to improve inside those time chambers.

The different passage of time somehow messed up the connection with the Dao, and it all became a mess. Similarly, it was apparently impossible to

properly use cultivation manuals since they somehow were connected to the Dao as well.

You could advance, but it was extremely arduous and left your foundation unstable, so you would only hurt yourself in the long run if you tried to take a shortcut and cultivate inside a place with a different time flow. That was why such spaces were never used to improve.

They did have some uses, though. The current situation was one use, where one could perform a trial without wasting time in real life. Another example was whether you needed to slow down your aging to be able to protect your clan for longer or just stay young enough to be able to enter a Mystic Realm that only opened in set intervals.

Of course, time-dilation chambers cost a fortune to build and run, and it was only something Ogras had mentioned that supreme forces might utilize. D- or even C-grade forces were very unlikely to own such an extravagant thing.

Zac was happy that he might not waste as much time as he feared, but he still immediately set out for the Profound Yin Sect. For one, he didn't know how much time was passing in the real world, and he wanted to get back to Yrial. He had been whisked away before he could get all the answers he was looking for.

Yrial was the key to so many things that were currently stumping Zac. He obviously knew a lot about Specialty Cores, and he no doubt knew the means to evolve them. How to combine two opposing concepts was also the specialty of Yrial, clearly displayed through the two balls that he'd summoned to play around with.

Zac felt that the orchid part of the quest was the key. If he managed to figure out a way to get it, he was most likely set. If not, he would simply sit out the five days and miss out on the opportunity of becoming the disciple of the Lord of Cycles. He simply wasn't ready to risk it all for this quest since there were too many people depending on him.

It was only ten hours later that he was hiding along a cliff wall, overlooking the female-dominated sect. His memories had unerringly led him to the Profound Yin Sect, and his travels had once more proven he was in a dreamscape. The forests were full of beasts between the levels 50 and 75, but when Zac killed them, he received no Cosmic Energy, meaning the animals weren't real.

The sect was placed in a large basin, and Zac noted that the whole area

was far colder than the surroundings. It was winter in the rest of the forest as well, but the valley seemed to be permanently in this state, and frigid winds rose from the valley floor.

The problem Zac faced as he looked down was how to even get close to the outer walls. There was barely any cover in the valley, making it extremely hard to sneak up on the sect. Apart from some boulders, there were only some odd trees that seemed to be almost made out of rocks, but they were extremely thin and sparsely placed.

Zac decided on the same course of action as Yrial in the end, though not as brazen. He roamed outside the valley for a few hours until he finally spotted a disciple on her own, and she even had roughly the same hair color as himself. Zac wasted no time and flashed over with **[Loamwalker]**, and the next moment, an unconscious girl lay in front of him.

Zac silenced the inner voice calling him a creep as he lifted the girl and took her away. He repeatedly reminded himself that this was all a dreamscape as he took her outer coat and placed it over himself. After some hesitation, he also bound and gagged her, but he believed that a cultivator should be able to extricate herself in an hour or so after waking up.

He didn't choose to kill her, even though she wasn't real. He felt it would impact his personality if he heedlessly killed like that. If he started wholesale slaughter of innocent people in a dreamscape now, then before you know it, he might feel it was okay to do it in real life.

Besides, it might backfire if someone found a murdered disciple. It might even alert the Sect Leader. A knocked-out one should elicit a much more restrained response if it was discovered. Perhaps the disciple would even be so embarrassed that she wouldn't report it if she came to early.

Next, he activated **[Thousand Faces]** for the first time in a long time, and he grimaced when he was reminded of how extremely painful it was to utilize due to the mismatch with his pathways. But only a few moments later, he had a face that bore a passing resemblance to the girl in front of him, but if he was properly looked at, one would immediately notice he was a man.

No matter what he tried, he wasn't able to change his features to those of a woman; the level or quality of the skill was simply not high enough. But after he had grown out his hair and covered his face slightly, he felt it was good enough for his purposes.

He also took her disciple token and used **[Inquisitive Eye]** on her to find out her name before he left. Just a few minutes later, he was trekking down

the valley, his heart rapidly beating as he neared the sect. His eyes scoured the walls in the distance for any response to his approach.

He did not immediately walk toward the main gate since it was continuously guarded, but he rather chose to meander a bit so that he approached the sect from the side. He wasn't too worried about this since he saw steps in the snow everywhere. It seemed taking a walk outside the walls within the safety of the valley was nothing uncommon.

Zac strolled for twenty minutes until he could confirm there weren't any guards along the wall. An array covered the whole sect, and it would be a waste of manpower to continuously guard the walls as well. The only guards were the squad that was placed at the gate.

The disciple token should be all that was needed to pass through the array, but he didn't know whether something else would trigger if he jumped over the wall instead of passing through the array through the wall. There was no answer in his new memories, so there was only one way to find out.

When he noticed the vision of the guards was blocked by a boulder, he suddenly flashed forward with **[Loamwalker]**, and the next moment, he was above the walls.

SNEAKING INSIDE

Zac's heart was beating like a drum as he hurried along a secluded path of the Profound Yin Sect. Things were starting to get a bit out of hand, and he had already left eight unconscious disciples in his wake. Honestly, he was unsure whether he had actually killed a few of them by mistake, but he pushed down any such thoughts at the moment.

The initial infiltration had gone just fine. Some sort of silent alarm went off, but he had already anticipated such a thing, and he hid to see what kind of response sneaking past the wall elicited.

Three guards arrived a minute later, and Zac had already hidden inside a nearby house, knocking out the occupant. She had only been level 31 and was likely a pretty fresh recruit to the sect.

Judging by the conversation of the guards, they didn't put much weight to Zac jumping over the wall. His token belonged to the disciple named Tilri, and they believed it was her who had crossed the wall rather than passing through the gate for some reason. They noted a demerit in her name, then went on with their day.

However, everything didn't go as smoothly from there. He took a very roundabout way toward the small garden that housed the Profound Yin Orchids to avoid people, but it was impossible to avoid them altogether. The garden was against a mountain wall in the back of the sect, and he had to pass a lot of structures to get there.

It only took Zac thirty seconds to get spotted, and the girl he encountered only needed another second to realize he was a man. Luckily, one second was all Zac needed to flash forward and tap her forehead with enough power to knock her out cold.

He dragged her into the nearest house, which alerted another person inside. Soon another disciple was lying unconscious with a large bump on her forehead next to her sect sister. From there, one mishap after another happened, and he felt it was only a matter of time before he would hear sirens blaring across the whole valley.

But he still hadn't given up. As far as he knew, everyone who had realized who he was had been knocked out, and the sect was only so big. He just needed to endure for another minute before he reached the garden.

A petite figure suddenly appeared from around a corner, and Zac instinctively slammed the hilt of his axe in her temple before she had even come into full view. Zac grimaced when he saw that she was barely as old as Emily, but what was done was done. She was stuffed behind a few sacks of rice inside a shed before he kept speeding forward.

A wave of relief spread through his body as he saw the cave that was his destination. The orchids grew inside, perpetually secluded from the sun. Their only nourishment was water from an extremely cold stream rising from the underground and the Nexus Vein that was placed beneath the valley.

The cave was off-limits to normal people, and there were no buildings or disciples close to the entrance. But Zac knew from his memories that a low-level E-grade elder sat inside to tend to and guard the flowers. It was mainly to keep any greedy disciples away, while also being a reward to the elder. Sitting amongst the flowers to cultivate drastically improved one's cultivation, though not as much as directly imbibing them.

Zac hurried through the entrance with his head lowered, taking one last look around to make sure that no one saw him enter. The moment he entered, he immediately changed direction toward the elder, trying to make his hair shroud his face for as long as possible. The elder seemed to realize something was wrong, and a frown immediately adorned her face.

"Wha—" was all the elder had time to say before Zac was upon her with a monstrous momentum from activating **[Loamwalker]**.

However, she clearly was no slouch, as a thick wall of ice immediately appeared in front of her as she started to fade away. Zac saw she was using some movement skill, and he knew he couldn't let her escape. The wall looked extremely sturdy, and it was empowered by some Dao, but Zac barreled into it like a bull with the help of the Dao of Heaviness.

Zac felt like some bones in his arm would break from the impact, but they held while the wall cracked. But Zac wasn't completely unscathed as a layer

of frost completely covered him and hindered his movements. It seemed to be the effect of a Dao, and Zac wasn't able to simply shrug it off.

But he was already in melee range, and his fist slammed straight toward the elder guardian before she could completely escape. He was still imbued with the Dao of Heaviness, and the fist slammed into her midriff like a wrecking ball.

The fist connected and forced her back into a completely corporeal form, and she was slammed back into the wall behind her, causing widespread cracks. However, his hand felt like it was frozen solid from the hit, and before Zac even had time to follow up with another strike to knock her out, he was pelted by dozens of extremely sharp icicles.

He managed to dodge a few and endure a few others, but he knew he couldn't take too many of these strikes. A couple of them managed to hit his body before he had time to activate [**Nature's Barrier**], and it felt like they contained some sort of cold poison.

If he didn't end the fight quickly, he would be turned into a Popsicle, so he forced his stiff body to move, and he landed another slam straight in her face. Blood spurted everywhere, and her face was almost caved in from the force of the punch.

She was pushed back into the frozen wall, and this time, she didn't get up again. A few twitches was the only sign that she was still alive, and Zac quickly moved his attention toward the dozen flowers in the garden.

He knew he was out of time. There was no way that the battle hadn't been heard from the outside, even though it was over in just a few seconds. Worse yet, he saw that some of the icicles had flown straight out of the cave mouth, likely alerting everyone in the area.

He ignored the elder and immediately flashed over to the closest flower and dug it out of the ground. There was already a cold-attributed storage box in his Cosmos Sack, and he quickly placed it inside before he put it back into his pouch. A glance at the quest menu showed that the progress of the quest had changed to **(1/2)**.

Zac sighed in relief, but he knew his difficulties had only started. He could hear the subdued shuffling of feet outside, yet no one entered. There was no doubt an ambush waiting outside, but Zac hoped that it couldn't be too organized since only a couple of seconds had passed. It was likely only the first responders to the scene.

If he could break out of the encirclement before the elders could wake up

from their closed-door cultivation, he had confidence he would be able to escape. The powerhouses were mostly in deep meditation, from what he understood, and they couldn't simply wake up and be fight ready in the blink of an eye. That was the only reason he'd dared to break in like this.

Zac activated [**Nature's Barrier**] again and imbued it with the Dao of Trees. He even imbued himself with the Dao when he noticed that it seemed to have a small restraining effect on the frost that still covered parts of his body. One of his insights was based on resilience against the elements after all, the ability to survive in any climate.

Wasting no more time, Zac rushed outside with his axe at the ready. The reason he didn't use it before was that he wanted to give himself a small window where the elder was confused due to how he looked. But if he'd sported a large barbaric axe when he entered the cave, he would no doubt have been immediately discovered, foiling his ambush.

He flashed out with his movement skill, and as he suspected, he was immediately met with a barrage of ice-attributed attacks. Zac growled and launched five fractal edges imbued with the Dao of Heaviness to crush any incoming ice. Frigid winds were trying to root him in place, but his blood pumped through his body due to his high Vitality, allowing him to keep running.

His fractal edges were extremely powerful and destroyed everything in their path before they kept moving toward the horrified disciples. But two strong auras erupted from two women who looked to be in their mid-thirties, and they quickly moved to intercept the strikes.

Luckily, these elders were amongst the weaker ones as well, likely barely past level 80, and it took all they had to intercept the five massive blades of death coming for their disciples. Zac took the chance and immediately activated [**Loamwalker**], escaping down the same path that he'd entered.

"Stop! Thief!" an enraged shout echoed behind him.

"Elder Gemoa is badly hurt!" another voice echoed with a tinge of panic.

Some worry started to rise in Zac's heart as he sensed one dangerous aura after another waking up, each more powerful than the last. Zac quickly took out a small pill from his pouch and ate it as he kept utilizing [**Loamwalker**]. The pill was a low-grade Blood Boil Pill that gave a temporary boost to Cosmic Energy and power, though using them too often would harm one's foundations.

But since Zac was just in a dreamscape, he didn't care about that and used

every tool in his toolbox. Since he no longer cared about stealth, the way that had taken him minutes before only took him a few seconds. Zac saw the air shimmer above the wall, and he furiously launched one **[Chop]** after another, each imbued with either the Dao of Sharpness or Hardness.

As he suspected, a shield had been erected, though it seemed that it mainly was used to protect from attacks from the outside. It only took three strikes to cause a large crack, and another strike to blast open a temporary hole for Zac to jump through without losing any speed. However, just as he was about to exit the shield, a massive ice boulder slammed into him out of nowhere, making him cough up a mouthful of blood.

He landed face-first into the snow outside, but immediately sprang to his feet and kept pushing Cosmic Energy through his legs as he sped out of the valley. Zac ignored his ragged state as he pushed himself toward the mountain in the distance. Hot on his heels were hundreds of women, each more beautiful than the last.

The only problem was that they all looked completely enraged, like they couldn't wait to tear Zac apart.

Now and then, everything from large icicles to huge snowballs sailed toward him to slow him down. A few of the Profound Yin disciples who seemed to focus on cold-attributed combat classes even ripped out trees from the ground and hurled them at him. But thanks to the distance, Zac had no problem avoiding them, often without even having to waste Cosmic Energy.

After almost a day of running, more and more female disciples started to fall behind, and after another day, only those who were at least late F-grade could keep up. However, the E-grade elders whom he sensed in the dwindling group did not seem inclined to push ahead of the disciples.

Perhaps they wanted Zac to lead them to a supposed leader, or perhaps they had already realized where Zac was headed and wanted to escalate the conflict. He even considered that they wanted to kill him in full view of the Everlasting Yang Sect to show what happened to those who encroached on their bottom line.

Whichever case was right, Zac felt more than happy to play along as he lugged toward the Everlasting Yang Sect. He could actually speed up himself and lose most of those behind him, but he opted to conserve his Cosmic Energy instead.

Besides, he was afraid that if he sped up to a pace that only the elders could endure, they would immediately pounce on him. So he leisurely ran

forward while dodging the occasional icicle as he tried to figure out his next move. He already knew that his original plan likely wouldn't work with the Profound Yin Sect hot on his heels. However, he felt it would be possible to sow some chaos and use that chaos to fish in muddied waters.

Finally, after another four hours, he was closing in on the Everlasting Yang Sect. Even Zac was starting to get winded by this point, whereas the remaining disciples who were still at F-grade were deathly pale, while others were actually carried by their elders. Perhaps they wanted to retain a certain number of experts for whatever would happen next.

Luckily, he wouldn't have to scale the whole volcano, since the sect was cut into the mountain, starting at the foot and going roughly halfway up. He also knew from memories that they had carved paths all the way to the magma inside, and the elites cultivated as close to the magma as possible since it emitted fire-attuned energies.

As Zac started to close in on the gates leading up to the sect, he sensed that his pursuers had begun to slow down. That wasn't good news for his plan, so he needed to improvise a bit. He took a deep breath and infused his lungs with Cosmic Energy.

"THE PROFOUND YIN SECT IS ATTACKING!" he roared at the top of his lungs, his energy-empowered volume enough to push away the snow around him.

The shout had a pronounced effect as, in seconds, a stream of red-robed disciples started to appear on the wall as the sounds of heavy drums echoed across the volcano.

SUBTERFUGE

Zac didn't stop running even if the wall was quickly filling up with somber-looking warriors, all of them looking ready to fight. However, a huge fireball ripped toward him, forcing him to a screeching halt as it slammed down in front of him, causing a large scorch mark.

"Help! I wish to join your great sect, but these crazy women want to stop me," Zac shouted as he stood right between the Profound Yin cultivators and the wall.

The cultivators from the Profound Yin Sect had also stopped their pursuit by now, but they seemed unwilling to let things go as they were. They seemed more than ready for a fight, even though quite a few of them were pretty spent from the ultra-marathon. But the disciples still in F-grade all ate some pill that seemed to perk them right up.

"Hand this man over to us, and we will not take this issue further," one of the elders said with a somber face.

There was only silence for a few seconds until the large gates suddenly rumbled as they opened, and a small group of cultivators walked out. They seemed to be roughly the same number as his pursuers, and Zac started to wonder if there were some unspoken rules between the two sects.

Perhaps they kept their clashes to a certain number to avoid too large losses. With their accumulated enmity, it wouldn't be surprising if they would launch an all-out war, but it would at best result in a pyrrhic victory. These two sects weren't the only forces in the area, and such an action would surely lead to the downfall of both sects.

"You will not take things further, you say?" a robust man with bulging muscles said with a teasing face. "I wonder what a couple of birds so far from

home would do if we don't comply."

"Romi, are you truly planning on testing our patience in the middle of winter? We are taking this man back either alive or in pieces. He grievously wounded Gemoa. A price must be paid," another of the Yin elders growled.

"It may be winter, but in this area, the Yin is always suppressed," the man called Romi scoffed before he turned to Zac. "Young man, you managed to hurt that bitch? Very impressive. Too bad you look a little girly."

Zac quickly tried to find a good course of action, and his face started to change. It was no longer the slightly feminine youngster with long hair standing in front of them, but rather a man in his forties with a masculine face.

Zac tied up his hair as he forcibly stopped his face from grimacing from the pain from changing appearance. He had decided to utilize [**Thousand Faces**] once more to become less threatening to the Everlasting Yang Sect. A middle-aged man defeating an elder was much more believable compared to a youngster. Perhaps they would think he was part of some other force otherwise.

"I managed to ambush her, but she was unfortunately too strong, so I couldn't kill her," Zac said with a gravelly voice. "I changed my face to sneak inside and get this."

He held up the box, and he quickly opened it to show the orchid. He held the box so that both parties would see the orchid within, and their expressions proved he was on the right track.

"I wanted to present this to your great sect as proof of my sincerity," Zac said as he threw a scathing glance at the Profound Yin elders. "Who would have known that these bitches couldn't get enough of my handsome face and chased me for three straight days?"

The members of the Everlasting Yang Sect only gaped at Zac in surprise, whereas the Profound Yin Sect members looked like they would explode in anger. Another of the Yang elders quickly noticed an opportunity to further piss off their enemies, and he looked over at the women with a sneer.

"A Profound Yin Orchid! A fine offering indeed. It's useless for us, but perhaps we could plant them and feed them to our cattle." He laughed.

That comment was the last spark needed to start a conflagration, and one of the female disciples screamed in anger as she launched a blade of ice right at the elder. However, he was somewhere in the middle of the E-grade and with a laugh easily melted it, causing a mist to rise around him.

The two sects needed very little encouragement, as the next moment, over ten attacks sailed through the air between the two sides. One of the elders even turned her eyes toward Zac in rage, and a crystalline bird appeared out of nowhere as it flew toward him with a screech.

Zac screamed in alarm, only half-faking it, and ran toward the members of the Everlasting Yang Sect. But the bird was extraordinarily fast, and its beak pierced his back. Zack fell over and spat out a mouthful of blood that immediately froze into sanguine crystals.

“Protect that man!” Romi shouted as a lance of fire erupted from his hand, shooting straight toward the elder who had attacked Zac from the other side.

Zac’s pathetic state wasn’t fully a ruse, as the peck from the bird had contained a massive amount of frigid energies that rampaged through his body. He desperately circled his Cosmic Energy along with the Dao of Trees to slowly grind away at it, but doing so left him almost unable to move.

Luckily, two disciples quickly ran over and lifted him up, and one of them even infused him with some fiery energy that helped combat the cold. However, the second one did not seem to be as benevolent, and Zac noticed a pair of greedy eyes looking at his Cosmos Sack.

“What are you doing? Get him inside the gate!” Romi shouted as two more molten streams erupted from his hands to intercept the disciples who tried to approach Zac.

Seeing that Zac was being taken away caused the brawl to turn into an all-out conflict, and soon the whole area had turned into a haze from the mix of water vapors and smoke from fires. Constant explosions and screams could be heard, though, and Zac shook his head in bafflement. They had been all too ready to go to war with each other.

Zac heavily hung on the disciple’s arm as he pretended to be extremely weakened by the strike. In reality, his eyes were scanning the rampart in front of him until he finally found whom he was looking for. A man in his late twenties or early thirties stood on top of the wall not too far from the gate, sporting a large sword fashioned from reddish stone on his back.

This was the core disciple whom Yrial had fought in the real world, and Zac’s theatrics was a bid to get closer to him. There was no way that he dared to infiltrate this sect as well with the commotion that he had caused, so he needed to take one of the rubies that had already been harvested.

The core disciple had taken the ruby out of his Cosmos Sack when

taunted by Yrial in his memories, and he hadn't needed to get it from anywhere. Since he was at Peak F-grade, he was likely preparing to use it and then evolve to E-grade, though Yrial had thrown a wrench in those plans.

"Just sit down and rest," the man who helped him combat the frigid energies in his body said to Zac after they entered the sect. "The Yin energies can leave hidden wounds if not properly dispelled."

"Thank you. I'll focus on recuperation," Zac simply said as he sat down and closed his eyes.

The battle was still raging outside, and the two disciples who had helped him back to the sect hurried back outside to join their brothers, and Zac was left largely alone. Almost all of the other sect members had their focus on the battle outside their walls, and it almost seemed like they were watching a play.

"Elder Romi's **[Molten Burst]** is as powerful as ever; it's even able to melt a hole straight through the **[Ice Bulwark]** of Tylaena," one of them muttered from atop the rampart.

Zac shook his head in wonder. The disciples even knew their enemies on a first-name basis, showing how often they clashed with each other. If they just put their differences aside, they would have been able to create a great sect with complementing strengths, just as Yrial's two attributes complemented each other.

But who knew if these sects even still existed in the real world. From what he had heard, the average sect only lasted between five and twenty generations, which meant for an E-grade sect 2,500 to 10,000 years. Between natural disasters, declining talents, and calamities thrown at them by the System, there was no such thing as a permanent force.

Since millions of years had likely passed since Yrial's feat took place, these two forces were most likely long gone and forgotten, their endless conflict not even mentioned in the ancient history books. Zac sighed with some melancholy as he opened his eyes and looked around. These projections all represented people with dreams and ambitions.

But Zac soon snapped out of it as he silently got to his feet. A few disciples looked over at him, but they didn't have time to do anything before Zac exploded into action. The ground beneath his feet cracked as he pounced right at the disciple who possessed the ruby he was after.

The core disciple barely had time to turn his head before Zac was upon him from behind. But the disciple was clearly a battle-hardened warrior, as

his hand was immediately gripping the large rock-sword on his back. He quickly raised it slightly to protect his head from Zac's incoming fist.

But even though he was a core disciple of the Everlasting Yang Sect, he was completely unable to endure the fist that was empowered with a High mastery Dao and almost 600 Strength. The sword slammed into the back of his head, and he was thrown forward, landing in a heap outside the sect.

Zac didn't give him a chance to gather his wits before he followed. He jumped down from the wall walk and landed right on top of the poor man, imbued with the Dao of Heaviness. Large cracks in the ground spread beneath the disciple, and his face turned green until he emptied his stomach.

Some of it splashed straight in Zac's face, but he reined in his disgust as he ripped the disciple's Cosmos Sack from his side. He gave the puking man another stomp for good measure as he scoured the inside of the sack for his target.

"Traitor!" a disciple screamed, and a few enraged disciples started to prepare attacks.

However, Zac's display of might made all of them hesitant to go first, allowing Zac to snatch the large red ruby before putting it away in his own sack. A quick glance confirmed his quest was (2/2).

But Zac's brows furrowed when he was still standing on top of the core disciple after a few seconds. Was something missing from the quest? However, his danger sense started going off, and he hurriedly moved away with **[Loamwalker]** a moment before Romi's **[Molten Burst]** ripped through the air where he'd stood.

"You have guts, thief!" Romi roared, completely enraged.

He was bleeding from his mouth, and his right shoulder was frozen solid from ice, but his aura was still stable, meaning he hadn't been critically wounded.

"You try to play our sects while stealing our treasures?" he growled. "You can forget about leaving this area alive!"

The fighting had already subsided, and the haze that covered the pitched battle between the two sects was quickly dissipating. Soon all the disciples and elders were in full view, and all of them sported various degrees of wounds. Some even lay unmoving on the ground, their fate unknown.

One thing that seemed to unite both camps was their seething hatred for Zac, though, and they all looked at him with burning eyes.

"I'm happy to see you guys finally getting along." Zac sighed before he

immediately sped away with his movement skill.

Quite a few dangerous auras were waking up inside the sect as well, and Zac knew he couldn't stay any longer. He fled into the forest with members of both sects in tow. This time, however, the elders were quickly outpacing their disciples, and Zac was forced to go all out.

Luckily, endurance was Zac's strong suit, and neither sect seemed to excel at speed. So Zac simply switched between **[Loamwalker]** and high-speed running for six hours until he finally had lost the last of the elders.

It was one of the elders from the Profound Yin Sect, and she screamed in frustration into the air when she finally gave up on the chase. Zac only shook his head with a wry smile as he kept running for another two hours. He found a secluded spot and sat down to wait out the clock.

When the quest timer hit zero, the world blurred, and the next moment, he found himself lying in a patch of flowers with a large moon shining down on him.

"You're back, as expected of my disciple. How about it, wasn't your master dashing back in the day?" Yrial's voice floated over from the pond.

Zac slowly got up to his feet, relieved to see that only six hours had passed since he got put under, meaning time passed twenty times faster inside the dreamscape.

"You're something, alright," Zac said with a shake of his head as he turned toward his new teacher. "I wonder how you escaped the pursuit of two rabid sects back then."

A FLOWER OF FIRE AND ICE

“How would some backwater elders catch up to the great Lord of Cycles?” Yrial laughed from his recliner by the pond. “What about it, is your master not amazing? I played those two sects like a fiddle. And that was in the real world, where one could actually die.”

The next moment, Zac was once again grabbed by an unseen force and placed on a mat not far from the pond.

“I wasn’t actually at risk of dying?” Zac said through gritted teeth. “I ran my ass off to avoid getting my soul torn to shreds.”

“Well, there was still danger. If you died inside, your soul would be hurt, and you would have to trade some of your credits for soul-healing pills,” Yrial said with a smile. “Those things are pretty expensive.”

That quickly calmed Zac down, and he thanked the gods that he hadn’t taken anything for granted in the dreamscape. Clearly, the trial was mostly a veiled attempt to show off his own feats, but it looked like the old ghost was finally about to hold up his end of the bargain.

“What are credits?” Zac asked, holding back any complaints or comments that might derail Yrial from handing over the inheritance treasures.

“When I needed to create this inheritance, I simply threw in a bunch of stuff that would be valuable for young cultivators and attached a price according to its value. For passing the first trial, you get between 1,000 and 10,000 credits, depending on how I feel. For also becoming my disciple, you get double,” Yrial explained. “What you choose to use those points for is up to you.”

The next moment, he fished out a crystal from his sleeve and threw it over to Zac, who caught it. Zac knew it was an information crystal from a

first look, and he guessed that the stored items were listed inside.

“So how many points do I get?” Zac asked with anticipation.

“Well, since you’re my terminal disciple, I guess you’ll start at maximum credits, ten thousand,” Yrial said, but he continued before Zac could get excited. “However, I’ll have to detract a thousand points for your face. Being a barbarian is no excuse for skipping proper skin care. I’ll also deduct a thousand for the way you defeated the construct. So eight thousand times two.”

Zac was already starting to become immune to Yrial’s comments about his looks, and he felt that the deduction for how he’d finished the first trial was fair enough. It still left him with 16,000 credits to spend, and he eagerly infused some Cosmic Energy into the information crystal.

A long list of items lit up in front of him, and he was surprised to see that Yrial had stashed over two hundred items that were exchangeable after finishing the first trial. Most of the items were priced between one to two thousand credits, meaning one would usually walk away with five items or so. However, there were a few items that were much more expensive.

[Ultimate treasure – Lock of hair: 10,000 Credits]

“Lock of hair?” Zac read out loud and looked up at Yrial with confusion. “What’s that?”

“You are my disciple after all! Impeccable taste. That item is a true lock of hair from my real body. Now that I’m dead, its value is truly priceless,” Yrial said with a sagely nod.

“Your hair?” Zac exclaimed, not being able to hide his disgust. “What would I do with that?”

Yrial’s face immediately scrunched up in anger, and the air around him seemed to freeze for a second before he took a deep breath to calm himself.

“What would you do with that? Gaze upon it in awe and wonder, of course. Hair from my head is an item of unlimited artistic beauty, the physical manifestation of perfection. How about it? You would still have a lot of points left over if you bought it,” Yrial said with anticipation.

Zac only snorted and kept looking, drawing another glare from Yrial. In reality, the item might not actually be as useless as Yrial described. Yrial had been a High or Peak C-grade Monarch when he cut that lock of hair, and Zac suspected its strength would be extraordinary. If he used the hair for crafting, he would likely be able to make an extremely sturdy item.

However, he wasn’t keen on wearing armor made out of human hair, and

he had no one who could craft using such high-grade materials. He instead looked for items that could give immediate boosts to his power, or at least assist in the coming battle with the Dominators.

The lock of hair wasn't the only suspicious item in the list. In fact, almost a quarter of the treasures were vanity items that related to the Lord of Cycles. There was everything from paintings to collections of his poetry. One item was just called "My fifth favorite scarf." But there were a lot of good things inside as well, almost to the point it was shocking.

He did find the soul-mending panacea, costing a whopping 1,500 points, more than any of the Attribute Fruits or even most of the Dao Treasures. However, Zac wasn't surprised since he knew just how troubling soul wounds were. If the wound passed a certain degree, the soul would just keep disintegrating, and almost nothing could help. That was why he was so careful about overtaxing his Dao.

There were also over a dozen Spirit Tools, each of them seeming to be of extremely high quality. When he focused on those entries, he could see them, and they all emitted a far greater aura compared to the tools he'd brought back from the Eastern Trigram Sect.

Part of it could be explained by superior craftsmanship, but the biggest reason was the grade of the tools. Zac was shocked to see that all of the Spirit Tools were E-grade except for a few, making them better than almost any weapon currently on Earth. And they weren't even that expensive.

All of the tools cost around two thousand, apart from the two robes that both cost 3,750 credits. One was a robe in the same vein as the robes he'd received from the System long ago, with the difference of it being a Spirit Tool. It was mostly white, though, with details in red and blue.

It was likely something Yrial had used until he'd switched to something better, or perhaps simply something he kept because he liked the colors. It seemed perfect for Zac, but he held back on an impulse buy so that he could go through everything. The other robe was a more gender-neutral robe that might almost be considered a dress on Earth, so it wasn't as tempting for Zac.

There was also a Spiritual Ship that seemed far superior compared to the disk he'd gained from the Eastern Trigram Sect, but Zac knew he couldn't afford it at the moment. It was a luxury item that he couldn't prioritize as things stood.

"I'm your terminal disciple. Why don't you simply give me all of this stuff?" Zac ventured.

“I only made a deduction for your face, but I could also make a deduction for your attitude.” Yrial snorted as he once again ran his fingers through the lake. “Don’t be greedy.”

“Brazla set some ground rules. I needed to put in enough treasures for at least twenty-five inheritors at F-grade, ten at E-grade, three at D-grade, and one C-grade inheritance. But if you pass the final trial, everything is yours,” the ghost added after a brief pause.

Zac quickly looked down, afraid to say anything that would make him lose any more credits, and continued to look through the list. Treasures were not the only things on the list, there were also quite a few skills and five cultivation manuals.

There were also almost thirty items that Zac didn’t recognize, and he had no idea what they were used for. Some were natural treasures, and a few of them cost well over five thousand points. But they didn’t seem to be either Dao Treasures or Attribute Fruits, making Zac unsure of their usage.

It was a huge amount compared to the Dao Fruits, which only cost between 800 and 2,000. But that only meant that they might be extremely good items that would be impossible for Zac to get his hands on normally.

“Could you recommend any items that would suit me?” Zac asked before he decided to throw in some flattery. “You know my situation, and you are far more talented and experienced than me.”

“I’m not as easily persuaded as that, little Tool Spirit.” Yrial snorted. “But perhaps if you bought a memento to remember your dear master by when you leave, I might be inclined to give a few tips.”

Zac gritted his teeth, and with great reluctance, he bought one of the cheapest ones, a portrait of Yrial sitting in a meadow of flowers, half of which were a fiery red and the other an azure blue. It cost him 500 credits, though, making Zac thoroughly annoyed.

“*A flower of fire and ice.* An excellent choice. I had a great artist create this to commemorate me breaking through to D-grade. If you hang it in your home, you will not only raise the grade of your interiors by multiple levels, but meditating on this picture will even help improve elemental Daos.” Yrial nodded, clearly looking pleased.

“So, advice?” Zac sighed as he placed the large painting in his Cosmos Sack.

“Well, first of all, you should buy **[Eye of Har’Teriam]**,” Yrial said without hesitation. “It’s simply the best thing available, apart from the lock of

hair.”

Zac quickly looked through the list and found it was the second most expensive item available. This one cost a whopping 9,500 credits. Zac’s eyes drifted toward all the other treasures he knew would help, but in the end he steeled his resolve and bought the thing. From what he could tell, the costs were very accurate in relation to value except for the vanity items.

“So should I eat it immediately?” Zac asked.

“No, wait until you have broken through to E-grade,” Yrial said with a shake of his head.

“I can’t use it now?” Zac said with exasperation. “You know how bad the situation is on Earth.”

“Well, just flee if it gets too bad,” Yrial said without concern. “You can even buy the teleportation token if you feel it’s too dangerous.”

The token he mentioned was a random-teleportation token that would allow him to go to a random D-grade world. Zac was honestly contemplating buying it since it only cost 1,000 credits. It would be a final lifeline and something that could at least give his sister a chance at survival if everything turned to shit on Earth.

“So, what does this Eye do?” Zac asked.

“It is guaranteed to open one of your hidden nodes, though which one can’t be controlled,” Yrial said with a smug grin.

Zac whistled in surprise, and he wasn’t too miffed about paying through his nose for the item. From all accounts, the hidden nodes were all good things that were like free permanent power boosts. Getting the first one immediately was sure to be helpful, especially if he decided to evolve before turning his attention toward the Dominators.

But clearly, Zac’s reaction wasn’t enough for Yrial, and he tsked unhappily.

“Ugly and stupid. The **[Eye of Har’Teriam]** is a treasure that never appears on baby worlds, and is not something that the System rewards for any quests. It’s only found in a few C-grade Mystic Realms containing the remains of a long-collapsed universe,” Yrial said. “Your master almost paid with his life to get it.”

“If it’s so good, why didn’t you use it yourself?” Zac skeptically asked.

“You can only use it in E-grade, and I couldn’t sell it. Every time I tried, I was almost hunted down and killed by a couple of greedy sects. I had to run for hundreds of years to get away,” he muttered, clearly still annoyed by the

situation.

“So what makes this item so special?” Zac probed.

“It is one of the few items that can guarantee the opening of a hidden node no matter who eats it. Not only that, it will even give you a clue of where your other nodes are hidden, which will make it infinitely easier to burst them open later as well.” Yrial huffed.

“Do you know how you normally find where your nodes are hidden? You use your cultivation manual and your inner eye to meticulously scour your body. Sometimes it takes a few months; sometimes it takes decades. For most, it never happens because they can’t form a resonance with the nodes. It’s exceedingly hard, and not even one in a million can open a single node, let alone multiple.

“For you, it would normally be completely impossible. Mortals have no conventional methods to create a resonance with their hidden nodes, so they would never be able to break them open by conventional means.

“There are extremely few treasures for someone like you to have a chance to open your hidden nodes, and this should be one of the better ones. It’s completely impossible to buy, and can only be found by chance.” Yrial finished his diatribe and took a deep breath for air. “Now, is your master amazing or what?”

“But wait,” Zac suddenly said. “With my... special constitution, do I even have hidden nodes?”

The blustering ghost suddenly froze, and his brows slowly started to contract into a frown.

SETTING A COURSE

Yrial's features smoothed out, and he adopted his lazy expression once again.

"No, that shouldn't be the case. There is no connection between talent and the number of hidden nodes; talent only affects the ease of breaking them open. So you should be fine. Everyone possesses at least the three gates unless their race gives them something similar," he said with a dismissive wave.

"The three gates?" Zac asked.

"The Gate of Truth, the Spirit Gate, and the Gate of Flesh," Yrial explained. "These are the three foundational nodes that most humans possess. One increases your connection with the boundless Dao, one expands your mind, and one tempers your flesh. All of them are pretty good, though the best ones are usually the special hidden nodes, and those vary from person to person."

Zac slowly nodded, remembering Ylvas' mention of bloodlines and constitutions. At least it seemed that no matter how bad his constitution was, he would still possess some nodes to open up.

"So how do I open the other nodes after the first one?" Zac asked after sighing in relief.

"There are two aspects to bursting open the hidden nodes," Yrial said. "The first is to locate them. This is normally impossible for mortals, so pay close attention to every feeling when you eat this treasure. Don't let anyone disturb you," Yrial said. "The second part is to force them open. Various treasures can do that, though they are always extremely rare as well.

"Sometimes the nodes even burst open due to special encounters. You might get a sense after an intense battle and might be able to open up a

hidden node through resonance. But that is extraordinarily rare,” Yrial said.

“Hidden nodes are about chance and fate. For most people, especially mortals, it’s impossible to force. So don’t fret if you can’t open as many as you aim for. There are other opportunities to make you stronger apart from bursting open all your nodes,” Yrial said.

Zac agreed and kept going through the list to spend his remaining 6,000 credits. After buying the Eye, he also bought the robe, leaving him with only 2,250 points. The treasures inside were mainly geared for either boosting one’s achievements at the peak of the F-grade or giving a good start right after breaking through the bottleneck. So after some hesitation, he bought a natural treasure that would give a significant boost to his Race after evolving.

It wouldn’t be enough to push him all the way to D-grade, but it was a good start. He knew that the attribute cap was quite high, but so were the attribute gains in the E-grade. He did not want to encounter the same issue as he had with his Strength last time. The natural treasure would get the ball rolling, and for the rest, he would have to use medicinal baths like most people.

The **[Fruit of Rebirth]** only cost 500 credits, as body tempering seldom was the hard part of progressing. Zac still had some problems deciding what to do with the rest of the points. He couldn’t afford the top-tier items, but he also felt that the other items couldn’t help him too much in the short run. He also bought the teleportation talisman for 1,000 credits in the end.

“You should buy **[Cyclic Strike]** as well,” Yrial suddenly said from the sidelines.

Zac quickly glanced through the list of treasures to find that it was an offensive skill that would cost him his remaining credits.

“Is it strong? What’s it good for?” Zac asked.

“I wouldn’t say it’s too strong an attack; that’s why it’s so cheap. But it will help you progress,” Yrial said, making Zac a bit confused. “I noticed that your utilization of Dao is still extremely crude. It’s not too surprising since such a short time has passed since the integration of your world, especially considering your embarrassing aptitude. But if you plan on walking the path of duality, this is something you need to improve before you advance.”

“How come?” Zac probed with some lingering confusion.

“To start creating a system and have your classes reflect your long-term goals,” Yrial explained. “**[Cyclic Strike]** isn’t a particularly amazing attack, but it requires two opposing Daos to work. So you will need to learn to

combine your Dao of Rot and Dao of Trees to channel it. It will be a good lesson for you to learn to control your Specialty Core as well.”

Zac noticed that Yrial was actually doing his job as a teacher, and he memorized every word the ghost said. Yrial seemed pretty happy with the attention he was getting, and a satisfied grin started to appear on his face.

“In fact, take this as the first lesson from your master. After looking through your situation, I understand that your current goal is something that has been born from a series of coincidences rather than a strict vision of your path for progression. You even learned the accompanying Dao inside my trial,” Yrial said.

Zac slowly nodded in agreement. What he said was true. He’d had no goal of walking a path of life and death in the beginning. He had only wanted to gain the Dao of Axes and perhaps use the Dao of Trees to heal and protect himself somewhat. But one thing after another led to his current situation.

“There is nothing wrong with that,” Yrial said with a nod. “Searching for your path, or being able to adapt it due to circumstances is a good thing. But now that you have started to crystallize your path, you need to formalize it.”

“What does that mean?” Zac asked.

“Your two classes are not moving in the same direction at the moment,” Yrial said. “But you can force them to align with the help of your Dao. The biggest problem is, in fact, your Epic class. I am pretty sure I understand your reasoning for choosing it, but getting classes with complementing attributes isn’t as important as complementing Daos. You need to force your classes into a new direction.”

“Change direction? Can I even control that?” Zac asked with bewilderment.

“Dao fusion is the easiest way,” Yrial said with a nod.

Zac suddenly understood what Yrial was getting at. His Undying Bulwark was currently based on the Dao of Hardness and the Dao of Sanctuary, exemplified by the vision of the ancestral protector. What would happen if he modified those Daos? Yrial nodded when he saw Zac’s thoughtful expression.

“It seems you understand. You have various options, but if you would listen to my opinion, I would recommend that you fuse your Seed of Sanctuary with your Seed of Trees, and your Seed of Rot with your Seed of Hardness. It is still worthwhile to pursue your Dao of Axe since it would work as the delivery method for your cycle of life and death,” Yrial proposed.

Zac's brows furrowed when he heard Yrial's idea. Honestly, the Seed of Trees and the Seed of Sanctuary together didn't seem like a bad idea. He could envision a large tree providing shade and protection, meaning it shouldn't be too hard to fuse the two. But the Seed of Hardness and the Seed of Rot?

"Are the Seed of Rot and the Seed of Hardness even possible to fuse?" Zac asked with hesitation. "And wouldn't that risk cutting off my path of progression? And also, how do you know of all my Daos? I never mentioned them, and I haven't used Seed of Sanctuary since I entered."

"Well, first of all, I'm your master, so how can't I know your situation?" Yrial said and waved his hand, causing a slightly modified version of Zac's status screen to pop up. "And I have to say that your situation is a bit disgusting. If I had this many titles with my supreme talent and beauty, I would have become a Divine Monarch by now."

"As for the other parts, it seems you have a too reductionist understanding of the boundless Dao. That is usually the case with lower worlds. Dao Seeds are not small isolated nuggets of truth, but part of an endless fabric," Yrial added and pointed at Zac with his finger.

Zac's vision once again started to change, making him worry that Yrial was once again sending him into a dreamscape. But the scenery soon changed, and he wasn't looking upon some new world, but rather an enormous fractal. It reminded him of the first vision he'd had when he had an epiphany on the Dao of Heaviness.

The fractal in front of him was far more supreme, though, like it contained all the secrets of the universe. At first, he thought it was Yrial's Dao, but he couldn't be sure because, to his surprise, he sensed the familiar auras from his own Daos in different parts of the fractal.

As far as he could tell, all his Daos were represented to some degree in the fractal, though they were only a small part of the tapestry. Zac tried to remember as many details as possible, but the esoteric knowledge hidden in the vision immediately slipped out of his hands. Soon the vision shattered, and Zac was back on the floating island again.

"Did you understand? Everything is part of something bigger. Those kernels of truth you have grasped aren't really the truth of Trees or truths of Hardness. They are simply truths that the System has packaged in an easy-to-digest manner. But it is within your purview to repackage them to something that suits your path better. It requires talent and a high understanding of your

Daos, though, so it is not something done in a day,” Yrial said.

“It simply seems a lot harder to fuse the Dao of Hardness with the Dao of Rot,” Zac said. “What Dao could I even strive for?”

“Well, the Dao of Corpses comes to mind, and it would be easy to upgrade to Death. But there are other alternatives as well, I’m sure. In any case, it will allow your next class to not be so unbalanced,” Yrial added.

“Unbalanced? My Undying Bulwark class is pretty damn strong,” Zac retorted.

“It is, but much of its utility is lost on you. It’s a class meant for an undead champion, leading legions of the dead into war. Is that a future you see for yourself?” Yrial probed.

Zac shook his head without hesitation. He wasn’t even sure he’d ever visit the Undead Empire, and he had no plans to keep the undead on Earth.

“I have a feeling that you walk a solitary path, just like I did. Your classes need to reflect that better. Your other class is much better in that regard, it boosts a little bit of everything, and its weaknesses are easily shored up,” Yrial said.

It was a sobering realization for Zac. He had felt that his second class was almost a cheat, but in Yrial’s eyes, it was barely serviceable. And what he said about being solitary was true. He was so far ahead of the others on Earth that it might even restrict his progress to travel in groups. Perhaps a small group of elites would work, but not armies.

“Have I screwed up my future by choosing the wrong class?” Zac sighed as he thought back to the other one that had been available to him, the class called Big Game Hunter.

“Hardly.” Yrial laughed. “Cultivation is a road of self-discovery. Running into a wall once or twice is expected. As long as you learn from your mistakes and adjust, the situation is rarely unsalvageable. “

“And that’s why you want me to incorporate the Dao of Sanctuary into the Dao of Trees?” Zac asked, somewhat understanding what Yrial was getting at. “To realign from the path of my current class?”

“Exactly. You don’t want to leave any Dao lying around that might affect your class choices negatively. Having too many Daos will cause your path to be crooked, so don’t get lured in by the bonus attributes. Every Dao must have a purpose, so you need to categorize your Daos into three groups.

“One for life, one for death, and one for attacks. Both your life and death groups will also help your defense as well due to the nature of your insights.

It will cause a balance that will make your progression smoother. Being a super trash will already make your path of cultivation extremely arduous; there's no need to complicate it further," Yrial said.

"Another alternative is to have four groups, with one for defense as well. In that case, you should not fuse your Daos as I recommended," the spirit then added after some thought.

Zac slowly nodded. It felt like a shroud over his eyes had been lifted, and he was finally seeing the path he should take. It truly helped to have an experienced master. Just a few small pointers would make his life a lot easier in the future. What was even more shocking was that the annoying narcissist in front of him was such a good teacher.

"How do I fuse Dao Seeds, though?" Zac asked. "I have only heard that it is possible, but not how you would actually do it."

"First of all, both need to reach the peak, so you have some work to do. After that, you need to merge the two Dao Seeds within your body while focusing on the way you want them to fuse. If you succeed, you will have a new Dao Fragment, a piece of Dao that is no longer a seed," Yrial said.

"What happens if I fail?" Zac asked.

"Then you'll receive a pretty monstrous backlash. Some die; others get their brains turned into soup. But with your constitution, you'll likely be fine after a few months of recuperation," Yrial said.

"Is it as risky to simply upgrade your Dao?" Zac probed with some hesitation.

"No, but it's a lot harder instead," Yrial said. "You need one piece of insight per stage to evolve a Dao Seed, apart from the peak where you need two. But to Evolve a Dao Seed into a Dao Fragment, you would need to attain the equivalent of five insights in one go."

"It's not really hard for someone in the D-grade, but it's extremely hard for someone in F-grade," the ghost continued.

"So by when should I have fused a Dao?" Zac asked.

"You have no choice; you need to do it before you evolve. For one, it's a minimum requirement to have a Dao Fragment to get an Epic E-grade class. But you should do it in any case if you're planning on getting a class that suits your path," Yrial explained.

IMPARTMENT

Zac frowned hesitantly when he heard that. He was extremely far from getting to the point of possessing four Peak Dao Seeds. The Dao of Sanctuary and Rot were only at the Early stage, and he had no idea when he would be able to push them all the way to the peak. Yrial seemed to understand what Zac was thinking, and snorted.

“You’re lucky to have such a magnanimous teacher. I will help you out a bit, though most of the work will depend on you,” Yrial said as he got up from his lazy position by the pond.

“What do you mean?” Zac said hesitantly.

“As my terminal, and only, disciple, I will give you an additional two gifts before you leave here,” he said, immediately, his aura exploded outward.

Immense powers radiated outward from Yrial as he floated up into the air. The islands beneath fractured and disappeared, their debris swallowed into a huge circle of energy that appeared behind him. Torrential amounts of energy ran through the circle, and it was as though it constantly changed its nature. The main two elements were those of fire and ice, and the debris was constantly remolded by these two forces.

Sometimes the circle gave Zac the impression of a cold asteroid belt, and the next moment, it was scorching hot plasma. It was both, and it was neither. Zac realized the difference between the C and D-grade for the first time, and any last doubt that the Great Redeemer was actually a C-grade powerhouse disappeared when he sensed the all-consuming aura of his master.

“For over two hundred thousand years, I walked my path, never looking back,” Yrial said, his voice completely different compared to the one earlier.

It contained endless strength and conviction. Gone was the lazy youth who loved to see his reflection in the pond, replaced with a powerhouse who had walked over mountains of corpses to reach his station.

“I impart my path of Cyclic Supremacy to you, in hopes you will reach the grand terminus,” he said next, his words echoing like thunder in Zac’s mind.

Zac looked up with somber eyes, seeing the enormous circle of untold power slowly shrink and condense until it only had a diameter of two centimeters. It still contained the massive amounts of energies, and it shone like a sun as it flew straight into Zac’s forehead, forcing him down on his knees. The next moment, he found himself in the miraculous space in front of the huge fractal once again.

The enormous fractal lit up with boundless luster, and it caused stars to light up in the pitch-black expanse around it. Each star felt ancient, as though it had existed since the beginning of time. Thousands upon thousands of them appeared, each of them containing boundless knowledge and power.

Zac was completely frozen by the sight, but an enormous snap shocked him awake. It was the large fractal that had suddenly gained a massive crack that covered a large part of it. Zac didn’t know why, but he instinctively knew that it was putting an extreme strain on the fractal to summon those mysterious stars.

Zac quickly looked around for what to do, since he knew this was something extremely important. Was he supposed to fix the fractal somehow? He prepared to move toward it, but the next moment he felt a dozen tendrils approach him. He couldn’t see them with his eyes, but his Dao Seeds strongly resonated with them.

They were the pure unadulterated Dao, and he felt that he could gain a new seed by just grabbing one of the tendrils and absorbing its knowledge. But he held himself back as he remembered Yrial’s words. Gaining random Dao Seeds could hamper one’s growth rather than helping, so he focused on the tendril that most strongly resonated with his Dao Seeds.

He wasn’t sure how long this magical state would last, seeing the worsening state of the fractal. So he hurriedly focused his soul toward one of the tendrils, one teeming with life and vitality. He knew it wasn’t the Dao of Trees, but rather something much grander. Not even the Dao of Life inside the construct was more than a shadow compared to what this tendril represented, and it was as though Zac was mesmerized as he approached it.

The moment his soul connected with the tendril, the world changed again. He was once again the Lifebringer with its inexhaustible life force, continuously growing and expanding. Everything could be a source of growth and empowerment, no matter if it was the planet, the air, or the universe itself. Even traveling through the boundless void could provide it with the sustenance it required.

A warm exuberance spread through his body, and Zac almost felt he would be able to live forever as long as he had access to Cosmic Energy. But he soon calmed down as his connection with the tendril ended, and he saw that it was slowly returning to its star in the distance.

Another crack in the fractal reminded him of the urgency of the situation, and he immediately pushed his soul toward another tendril, this one containing boundless darkness and desolation. Zac stabilized his mind and connected with it as well, and once again, the world changed.

He once again saw the Lifebringer, but this time, it didn't shine with boundless vitality. The gargantuan tree still floated through the boundless expanse, but its leaves were no longer emerald crystals. They were shrunken and graying, and some sections of the enormous canopy were completely barren.

Nothing lasted forever. Life would inevitably give way to decay, and even the Tree of Life was no exception. Its trunk was mostly hollowed out, and massive life force was leaking out in a slow death. Rot spread from within, and soon there would be nothing left.

Zac shuddered as the connection with the tendril broke, and he brought some of the death with him. He had no idea whether what he saw was true, or whether it was an adaptation to fit his own Dao. But in either case, he felt that his newly acquired seed had grown substantially in its space in his mind.

By this point, the whole space was shaking, and Zac quickly moved on to the next tendril that resonated with him. It gave him a feeling of piety, of self-sacrifice and that everything in the universe was connected. He felt it was strongly connected with his Dao of Sanctuary, and he quickly connected with it. He was suddenly standing next to millions of people, looking up at the ancient protector, seeing the gentle smile on his face as he turned to face the end of the universe.

But Zac had no time to glean anything as the vision shuddered and broke apart. The insight slipped out of his grasp, and he once again saw the large fractal. This time, it was illusory, and in just a few seconds, it was completely

gone. The next moment, the stars in the universe receded, taking their boundless knowledge with them.

The vision ended, and he was once again standing on the last intact island.

Zac immediately sat down with his eyes closed, ruminating on the massive gains he had just received. It was only thirty minutes later he once again opened his eyes. The first thing he noticed was that Yrial's form had grown dim, no longer exhibiting the boundless power as before. Zac had a feeling that imparting Zac with these massive Dao insights didn't come without a steep cost.

"This gift is immense," Zac finally said as he opened his eyes. "Is there anything I can do in return?"

"What could you do, little brat?" Yrial said with a snort. "Who knows how long I've been dead? Just be thankful that I didn't waste my impartment on someone else after I created this place."

"What do you mean?" Zac asked with confusion as he got up to his feet.

"What I gave you was a Dao Impartment. Most can only do that once in one's lifetime, and only after you have formalized your path," Yrial explained. "The cost is also massive, and very few are willing to pay the price. But then again, it does not really matter, seeing as I am dead."

"I'll remember this," Zac said with a nod.

He remembered the massive fractal and realized that was likely a representation of Yrial's understanding of the Dao. It had taken serious damage to summon those mysterious stars, meaning that imparting the Dao like that would likely cause massive damage to one's foundation.

"Don't be so serious," Yrial said with a wave as he produced a crystal. "This is my second gift to you. I took the liberty of studying your core a bit more while you were walking in your master's shoes. It is marvelous, but it seems to come with a drawback. It is pretty arduous to change your race, no?"

Zac hurriedly nodded in agreement. The issue of changing between his two races was a constant annoyance. He hated the feeling of dying, and he was worried that something disastrous would sooner or later happen while he was out cold while he changed form.

"I need to essentially die to change class. Or at least I haven't found a better method," Zac said.

"I figured as much." Yrial nodded. "The two sides are almost completely

separated, which isn't the case with a normal Duplicity Core. This crystal contains a skill that you can learn as both an undead and as a human. It will start the transformation for you without having to die. There is still a limit, though. There is simply too little interconnectivity in your nodes; a proper cycle isn't formed. So it will still take roughly ten to fifteen seconds, and you will be quite weakened during that time."

"That's still a lot better compared to the old method. I was out cold for minutes there," Zac eagerly said as he accepted the crystal.

It might still be pretty risky to use it in battle, but it was far better than before.

"Don't worry too much. The time needed to change class should drastically decrease when your core upgrades to the next rank," Yrial said. "I believe the skill should still be usable as well. If not, I'll just modify it when you come back."

"How do I upgrade it?" Zac probed.

"I would guess that you need to feed it a higher grade of life and death," Yrial said. "A great treasure representing each half of the whole. That and a lot of energy."

As he held the crystal in his hand, he was amazed at the means of Yrial. In just the few hours while he was undergoing the trial, Yrial had managed to get a grasp of Zac's odd core and design a skill that worked with both his classes to better utilize it. Not only that, but he also had time to inscribe it into a crystal, something that he had heard was normally extremely hard.

Meanwhile, he hadn't even taken the first step toward creating a skill of his own, something he knew was important in the future. From what he understood, every stage came with less handholding from the System.

He knew he would still receive a few skills in the E-grade, but he was also expected to create new ones himself, or at least get his hands on them some other way. At least he had gained [**Cyclic Strike**], which might help him take the first step in that direction. Zac immediately infused some energy into the crystal, but suddenly, his face got odd as he looked up at his master with a helpless look.

"What? Is something the matter?" he asked with innocent eyes.

"No... It's nothing." Zac sighed as he looked at the name of his new skill. "It's perfect."

[Beauty Yrial's Great Transformation Skill]

"That's fine, then." Yrial nodded. "With this, the first trial is over. You

will not be able to enter this place again within ten years. Before you come back, you should at least have reached level 140 and have pushed your three Dao Groupings to High Fragments. Otherwise, you might not survive the trial. And even if you do, I'll just deduct credits because you cannot follow instructions.”

“Ten years?” Zac blurted out, but he suddenly took another look at Yrial's faded form.

The impartment had no doubt drained the spirit quite a bit, and perhaps he needed to rest for a decade to restore his form. He was only a fragment of a soul, after all, and the might he'd released for that instant was massive.

“Now, don't disappoint me. If you ever doubt yourself because of your unremarkable looks or shitty aptitude, remember this: the great Lord of Cycles took you in, so you cannot be a complete waste of a human being,” Yrial said with a wave, and the next moment, the air started to shimmer and distort.

Zac was about to give one final thanks, but Yrial's voice once again echoed out through the area before he was completely ejected. This time, it held a majesty that reminded Zac of the great power he'd emitted right before the impartment.

“The path you have chosen is even harder than mine, heading into the unknown. Many will tell you to give it up, to not bite off more than you can chew. Ignore them; they are condemned for mediocrity. Only when you walk your own truth will you be free.”

He once again found himself inside the grandiose hallway of the Towers of Myriad Dao, and Zac looked up at the ten-meter-high statue with mixed emotions. There was no denying that Yrial was a bit annoying and a true narcissist, but the help and gifts he had provided might last Zac a lifetime.

Yrial had taken Zac's formless idea and turned it into a reality. Zac now knew exactly where he was at and what steps he needed to take to truly walk upon the path of Life and Death. But it had also made him realize just how much he needed to improve before he could evolve to E-grade.

Luckily, Yrial had provided him with an extremely valuable kick-start to get him going.

RETURN

Zac finally opened his menu to properly check the result of the impartment. He was eager to see what his actual gains were. But before he could take a proper look, he noticed some movement in his periphery.

“Thank god you are okay,” Kenzie’s voice suddenly sounded, and Zac saw her get up from a sofa not far from his statue. “We were worried when the hours kept passing.”

Brazla sat in an opulent throne next to the sofa, and he looked over at Zac with disinterest.

“You took quite some time. It can’t have been easy to pry treasures out of Lord Yrial’s hands with that face of yours.” The Tool Spirit snickered.

“It worked out fine in the end,” Zac said with a sigh. “If you knew about Yrial’s disposition, why didn’t you warn me?”

“It’s not for me to decide your path. Worst case you die and your sister inherits the towers.” Brazla snorted.

Zac shook his head and ignored the annoying Tool Spirit.

“Give me a second. I need to go over my gains,” Zac said to Kenzie as he once again opened his menu.

Name: Zachary Atwood

Level: 74

Class: [F-Rare] Hatchetman

Race: [E] Human

Alignment: [Earth] Port Atwood – Lord

Titles: Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt – 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter

Limited Titles-

Dao: Seed of Heaviness – High, Seed of Trees – Peak, Seed of Sharpness – Middle, Seed of Hardness – Middle, Seed of Sanctuary – Middle, Seed of Rot – High

Core: [F] Duplicity

Strength: 587 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 134%]

Dexterity: 290 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 134%]

Endurance: 742 [Increase: 71%. Efficiency: 134%]

Vitality: 433 [Increase: 61%. Efficiency: 134%]

Intelligence: 160 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 134%]

Wisdom: 219 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 134%]

Luck: 132 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 134%]

Free Points: 3

Nexus Coins: [F] 296,516,043

The improvements were pretty noticeable all around, but Zac was most interested in the advancements of his Daos. He quickly opened his Dao screen and took a proper look at the changes.

[Trees (Peak): Endurance +20, Vitality +90, Intelligence +5, Wisdom +5]

[Rot (High): Endurance +5, Wisdom +45, Intelligence +10]

[Sanctuary (Middle): Endurance +5, Intelligence +10, Wisdom +15]

Not only had his Dao of Trees reached the peak, but his Dao of Rot had also completely skipped one stage and reached a High mastery. It truly made

him want to quickly learn [**Cyclic Strike**]. An attack utilizing two Daos where the worst one was High mastery could only be extremely powerful.

He surprisingly enough had also managed to upgrade the Seed of Sanctuary as well, but he only been had been shown a small glimpse of the vision, so it only reached the Middle stage. But he knew that wasn't the extent of the Dao Impartment.

He still remembered the boundless insights in the stars, and he knew that connecting with those tendrils would make his progression on those particular Daos a lot smoother compared to others. Such a boon was extremely great for someone like him who lacked any affinities.

Truth be told, Zac was still pretty unsure what that actually meant since he felt he could advance his Dao just fine up until now. He was even on the second spot on the ladder, only being trumped by the Abbot. But perhaps the difference would make itself clearer as he progressed further.

Zac closed the Dao screen and looked over his other gains. He was a bit disappointed that the attributes he'd gained wouldn't provide him with too many benefits, but it was better than nothing. He'd already known that would likely be the case when he chose the two tendrils representing life and death over those that could improve his Dao of Heaviness and Sharpness.

Surprisingly, he had gained not one but two titles in the trial as well. He had finally passed the 2,500 attribute barrier, providing him with another title. Better yet, it was a special title that gave an attribute effect.

[Tyrannic Force: First to attain 2,500 Attribute Points in world.

Reward: Effect of Attributes +5%]

[Achievement Hunter: Gain 25 Titles while in F-grade. Reward: Effect of Attributes +5%]

He'd already known about this title, but the one he saw in the title booklet instead provided 5% to all attributes. It seemed that being the first to gain this one gave him a slightly better version. The other one was a complete surprise though. He had no idea there was a title for gaining titles.

Zac understood why it was a high-tiered title. If he looked at most of his titles, they were things that almost no one would gain. He guessed that most would end their stint in the F-grade with between five and ten titles. Elites might even pass fifteen, but twenty-five was something that perhaps only a progenitor could get.

The effects of the high-tiered titles were really starting to stack up, and by now, they would completely cancel out even the best boosts that proper cultivators could get from their cultivation manuals.

Apart from that, there was nothing to note. His Nexus Coins remained the same, meaning that none of his kills inside the trial had provided Nexus Coins. He wasn't surprised about the beasts he'd killed in the Dreamscape, but he was a bit confused about the Dao Construct.

But by now, he was so used to not understanding how things worked, he simply shrugged it off. He put his free points into Strength before he turned toward his sister again.

"How did it go for Ogras? He should be out by now, right?" Zac asked.

"It only took him three hours, but he left immediately afterward. He said he needed to enter seclusion to incorporate his gains," Kenzie said before she lowered her voice. "I don't know, he didn't look too happy about the results. But he seemed fine."

Zac frowned when he heard that Ogras' experience wasn't without its own tribulations. He threw another gaze at the Tool Spirit. Were all the inheritances made by troubling individuals whose personalities had turned them into pariahs? As long as Ogras was fine, he wouldn't pry, but it made Zac a bit leery about letting others risk their lives in the remaining trials.

"Did he say whether he was coming to Westfort?" Zac asked, making Kenzie shake her head.

Zac slowly nodded as he started to walk out of the trial with his sister in tow. He actually wanted to enter seclusion himself to incorporate the massive gains he'd received from Yrial's impartment, but he simply didn't have time. Besides, he wasn't someone who had relied on meditation thus far, and he felt it would be more effective to get accustomed to his improved Dao Seeds in the heat of battle.

"What about the others, have they already left for the Marshall Clan?" Zac asked.

"No, they're still here. Emily was about ready to break into the trial ground and drag you out," Kenzie responded with a smile. "We sent a representative to relay that you're running late."

"Okay. Apart from Nonet and Emily, has anyone else said they want to come with?"

"Well, Calrin wants to go," Emily noted. "The negotiations for setting up a branch have hit a snag. However, Julia came by earlier. It seems she doesn't

want to go after all.”

Zac wasn't overly surprised by that, seeing how strong Emma's hatred for the New World Government was. It was pretty hard to defend one's employer when there were so many shady dealings going on. Zac also had a somewhat bad feeling about Thomas Fisher. How had he gotten so strong so quickly? What was the government up to?

“That's fine, I guess. Our dealings with the New World Government can go through the Marshall Clan for now,” Zac said.

“There's also Lyla and Olivia,” Kenzie added after some hesitation. “They both kind of want to go back to Greenworth to look for their families, if only just to bring them here.”

“I'm honestly not sure how I would accomplish that,” Zac hesitantly said. “Their teleportation network is closed.”

“Well, just ask around while you're over there,” Kenzie said before an impish smile started to spread on her face. “So, are you excited about seeing Thea?”

Zac almost missed his step before he quickly found his bearing.

“I guess; she's still holding on to a lot of treasure I lent her.” Zac nodded, evading the real meaning of the question.

He, of course, knew what his sister was getting at, but he honestly didn't know how he felt about it. He had enjoyed the two weeks that he'd traveled the Eastern Trigram Sect with Thea, but he wouldn't go so far as to say there was love. He had somewhat shut down in that department since Hannah had stabbed him. Kenzie only snorted with a roll of her eyes, but she didn't stress the issue.

“You sure you don't want to come with?” Zac asked.

“No, I feel I am pretty close to gaining another Dao Seed. I want to focus on that instead,” Kenzie said. “I want to be able to protect myself, but I'm still too weak.”

“Finally, I was going crazy!” a shout echoed through the forest as Emily rushed toward the two the moment they entered Zac's compound. “And that big one is no fun.”

To Zac's surprise, he saw that Emily was still slightly covered in dirt and war paint. Had she put it on on purpose? Zac mutely gazed on her face for a bit until it dawned on him. Was she trying to hide her childish features by obscuring them?

“Where is Nonet?” Zac asked.

“They’re meditating in that courtyard over there,” Emily said and pointed at one of the buildings that were usually empty. “Are we going now?”

“In a bit. Someone get Adran as well. I’ll be needing his assistance for this trip,” Zac said as he walked toward the courtyard.

He felt it wasn’t enough to only bring a teenager, a gnome, and an Anointed with him. The Marshall Clan was filled with wily old businessmen and politicians, and Zac was in no mood to handle those types on his own. Normally, he would have brought Mr. Trang as a buffer, but he had taken up as the admiral of his burgeoning naval force.

He was likely on his way back to the other continent to set up a base camp at this moment. Ogras was another candidate, but he was a bit unreliable, and with his history with the Marshalls, he might rather become a liability. That left Adran and Abby, and it felt like Adran was the best choice.

Zac entered the courtyard and immediately saw Nonet sitting in the center of it. He was once again reminded just how massive these guys were, and it even looked like Nonet had grown at least half a meter since they’d met last time. Did they keep growing as their levels increased?

“Long time no see,” Zac said with a smile as he sat down. “How is Hive Kundevi?”

“Hive is thriving now that our tunnels are restored. My warriors were getting restless though, but the eradication project in your mines have kept them busy. The hatred of corruption is slowly disappearing. It gives us peace, but it also leaves us without purpose,” Nonet said. “Your power keeps growing, Lord Atwood. I can no longer sense the limits of your Strength,” Nonet added after looking him up and down. “It will be needed against the Dominators, especially with their recent boost in power.”

Zac sighed with a nod.

“I encountered Inevitability in the hunt,” Zac said with a helpless grimace. “They are extremely strong. I am not confident in defeating them unless I evolve first.”

“Do not forget, you do not stand alone,” Nonet said. “That is why I am coming with you. I need to discuss our response with my people.”

“I heard something... from Inevitability. About the Anointed,” Zac hesitantly said.

“That we will not be able to advance to what the System calls E-grade?” Nonet said. “We know. I already feel I am approaching the limits of my body. That is why I wish to join you in this venture. The age of the Anointed

is coming to an end, but we have one final task to complete. I cannot rest easy knowing the Dominators are still out there. The Cosmic Energy might not be corruption after all, but that group still brings about the corruption of the soul.”

Zac nodded and retold what he had learned about the Dominators in the hunt, about the Great Redeemer and the connections that he’d found.

“The Great Redeemer...” Nonet muttered and clenched their fist. “There were always rumors of a great leader pushing the Dominators forward. To think it was like this. Selling out their own planet and people for strength. They are true abominations!”

Zac nodded in agreement. It took a special kind of callousness to condemn your whole planet for a shot at getting stronger. Especially when that wasn’t the only method of gaining strength. They could just have progressed on their own like the rest, but instead chose such a sinister path.

“Well, I have already met one more Anointed who spoke of a council. They are preparing for battle,” Zac said. “I hope you can get in touch with them through the hive near Westfort.”

The two discussed things some more, where Nonet confirmed some details about human culture. This was the first time they had properly left their Hive, it seemed, and they wanted to avoid causing trouble. It seemed Ibtep would also join them, though Zac was unsure whether that special Zhix would really lessen any potential confusion.

In the end, they decided that Zac would join Nonet at the hive two days after he arrived unless they came back first. The two got up and met up with the impatient teenager outside.

It was time to go to Westfort.

WESTFORT

“It’s almost night already,” Emily huffed. “We’re so late!”

“Ibtep tells me this one is neither your progeny nor your mate,” Nonet said as they looked down at Emily with curiosity. “What purpose does she serve? Is she a warrior slave from a vanquished hive? Zhix slaves are seldom accorded such freedom of speech.”

Emily stopped in her tracks and gaped up at Nonet, who calmly returned her gaze. Zac coughed as he shot a gaze at the teenager. It honestly was a good question. Just what was Emily to him? In a sense, he had picked up her in the spur of the moment, and he knew he had somewhat used her as a temporary replacement for Kenzie, like an emotional binky. But now he wasn’t sure.

“I guess she’s a mascot?” Zac hesitantly said after a bit, drawing an enraged glare from Emily.

“I’m battle support! I can make anyone stronger! I just had a late start,” she said grumpily before she turned toward the teleporter and walked away in a huff.

“The young can be capricious,” Nonet said with a nod. “We usually send them into the deep caverns to learn survival and moderation. Is human childrearing the same?”

Zac was about to say no, but he wasn’t sure if that was true any longer with Alyn in charge. They did send the students to battle beasts as soon as they were strong enough. He also remembered Abby saying that making a beginner zone was already underway.

“Well, we do something similar with our Academy here, I guess. But now we have adapted to teach more about Cosmic Energy,” Zac said.

“Would it be possible to send a few of our young to this Academy of yours?” Nonet asked.

“Sure,” Zac said with a shrug, as he was sure Alyn wouldn’t mind a couple of war-crazy students to increase the competitiveness. “It’s getting late. Let’s go.”

“Wait, let me come with,” a light voice suddenly resounded, making Zac look over with a slight frown.

Alea was walking over, wearing one of her battle dresses that contained defensive charges. Zac was unsure what to say when he saw her approach with Calrin in tow, as the two hadn’t spoken since Zac had told her off.

She had avoided him since the incident, even skipping out on meetings in favor of cultivating at the odd poison tree in the mountains, and Zac didn’t really know where he stood with her. However, the thought of bringing a slightly unstable poison mistress to the Marshall Clan made Zac’s hair stand on end.

“Why do you want to go?” Zac hesitantly asked.

“To provide backup. Adran and Calrin will likely be busy in meetings all day, but the Marshall Clan has so many people. You need someone who will be able to keep the bureaucrats at bay while you focus on the library and other more pressing matters,” Alea said. “Ogras said I should go. Janos won’t be any help, and Ilvere is a meathead.”

“You should understand why I’m reluctant to bring you,” Zac said.

Alea slightly frowned for a few seconds before she suddenly looked up at Zac with a determined look. The next moment, she started to change, growing into a horrifying swamp monster that was as tall as Nonet. Zac took a step back in surprise, and a knife appeared in Nonet’s hand as though from nowhere. However, the large monster didn’t attack anyone, and it soon started to shrink again, turning into a conspicuously naked Alea. Zac’s eyes widened a bit before he forced himself to look away.

“Before I arrived at this planet, I tried to force a change in my constitution to one that would better suit my skills,” Alea said as she unhurriedly dressed herself again. “My Heritage is incomplete, and some critical details were missing. It went awry, and that form was the result of it. It has also caused some internal imbalances that made me... impulsive.”

Zac looked over at Alea, who looked straight back at him.

“But in the past month, I’ve made tremendous progress by cultivating beneath the tree of Toxic Ascension. My body is still slightly impacted, but I

have at least driven the toxins out of my mind,” she said.

“Fine, let’s go.”

Zac honestly wasn’t sure about his decision as he walked with the others in tow toward his teleporter, but he felt this trip could be used as an experiment. Alea was extremely powerful and would likely be more helpful than anyone else in the upcoming battles apart from Ogras.

If she could prove that she could be trusted and work in a group again, it would be for the best. Then he could slowly return various responsibilities to her. And truth be told, he simply missed having her around. And he didn’t believe she would cause too many problems, especially not after what had happened the last time.

“But I’ll make it clear. No poisons or anything like that unless we are attacked, got it? These people are our most important allies for the upcoming battles,” Zac said.

“I know what to do.” Alea simply nodded.

Soon they arrived at the teleportation platform, and the group found Ibtap, Nonet, and Adran waiting along with Emily. Zac internally sighed again, as he felt this would be like a repeat of his motley crew when he’d gone to the auction.

Only this time, the ratio of aliens to humans was even worse.

“Eh, Alea is coming as well?” Emily gaped from her spot next to the teleporter before she gave Zac an odd glance. “You are pretty gutsy.”

“What?” Zac asked with a frown.

“Nothing,” Emily said with a giggle. “Let’s go!”

The next moment, the teleporter lit up, and the group walked inside one by one. The group soon found themselves in a modern lobby. Zac didn’t know why, but he had for some reason expected to arrive at some old Gaelic fortress or something of the kind.

Thea hadn’t talked a lot about her heritage, but from what he had pieced together, the Marshall Clan was practically ancient, with over one thousand years of history. But the surroundings reminded Zac of the lobby in New Washington, looking a lot like a terminal.

However, there were signs of the new reality they lived in as well, as large fractals covered both the walls and the roof. They were pretty crude compared to what he had seen in other places, but it clearly showed that the Marshalls might put even more effort into inscriptions than Port Atwood did. He remembered the homemade tools Thea had used, for example, such as the

hazmat suit and the tent.

Unsurprisingly, the group consisting of beings of all shapes and sizes garnered quite a bit of attention, but people were more prepared this time. Roland Marshall had clearly been waiting, as he was snoozing on a comfortable sofa. But when their group arrived, he quickly perked up and hurried over.

“Lord Atwood, I am happy you were able to make it after all. I must say, only a few days have passed and your aura has become even more formidable. As expected of Earth’s greatest powerhouse,” he shot off in quick succession as he got a proper look at the group. “I see that you’ve brought a larger retinue this time.”

“As you know, my city is on an island,” Zac said with a small smile. “A few people wanted to come with to stretch their legs.”

“Of course,” Roland said with a nod, as though bringing this odd group was completely normal.

Zac introduced them one by one, though Roland clearly knew of Ibtap and Calrin from before due to their appearance at the auction. The impatient Sky Gnome immediately tried to glean why he hadn’t been able to set up a branch in Westfort, but Roland expertly dodged the question.

The size and appearance of Nonet was a challenge for Roland, and Zac guessed Thea had recounted his meeting with Herat during the hunt. It looked like the portly ambassador was deathly afraid he’d get blasted by a punch by the hulking Anointed, nervously grasping some sort of defensive treasure. Thankfully, nothing like that happened, and things quickly proceeded after the introductions.

“I will take you to the place of the meeting, but if you all would follow me first. All visitors must receive their tags. It is a security measure to combat infiltration by invaders or other hostile forces,” Roland said as he ushered them toward a manned counter.

Zac and the others simply followed along, and each got a small metallic disk. Surprisingly enough, there was a small engraving on it.

“This seems to be a tracking rune that is used in conjunction with an array,” Calrin said as he glanced up at Roland. “In most societies, this level of monitoring would be considered rude.”

“I do apologize. However, war calls for desperate measures. We are limited in our methods compared to the established forces of the incursions and have to use a somewhat heavy hand to protect our interests,” Roland said

with an apologetic smile.

“It’s fine,” Zac said with a disinterested shrug, as they had no plans to do anything untoward at Westfort.

“Excellent. If you would follow me to the West Compound. It is the inner area of Westfort where the main clan resides and does its business. A small welcoming dinner is prepared, and I am sure Thea would be happy to see you again,” Roland said. Zac nodded but remembered his company and threw Alea a sneaky glance to make sure she wouldn’t cause any trouble. She caught his glimpse and only rolled her eyes in response. The group was shown to a series of cars, and Zac noticed that even the car windows had engravings on them. Just how many inscribers had these people employed?

Ibtep wasn’t too excited since they had seen these kinds of things before, but Nonet was curious to the point they actually lifted a car up to study its undercarriage. Zac grimaced when he saw the horrified chauffeur behind the wheel, but the Anointed soon put it down on the ground again.

“I, ah, hadn’t quite expected the appearance of Anointed Nonet, so I am afraid I have no vehicles ready that can accommodate their size,” Roland hesitantly said.

“I will follow on foot,” Nonet shrugged as they looked around. “I am curious about human settlements anyhow.”

It was probably lucky that they were a bit late. The appearance of a four-meter insectoid walking the streets would probably be enough to cause a panic, even if cars of the Marshall Clan accompanied it.

The town was larger than Zac had expected, and he suspected that well over a million people could live here provided that the buildings they passed were occupied. But he noticed that most of the structures were recent additions. In fact, Zac realized Westfort might contain more recently built structures than Port Atwood.

There was not much traffic, though, and they soon arrived at a manned wall. It didn’t seem to protect the core of the town, but rather a side section much like his own inner wall. Roland flashed a badge, and their convoy passed through the heavily armed gates without issue. They found themselves in a large neighborhood with a mix of large mansions. If Westfort weren’t a small town, he would have guessed that they were embassies by their varied designs.

“While the Marshall Clan maintained larger offices in London before the integration, much of our business was still handled right here in Westfort.

These buildings were both residences and offices for family members holding various positions in our conglomerate,” Roland explained when he noticed Zac’s interest.

“Just how many family members does the Marshall Clan have?” Zac asked.

“It’s hard to say, really,” Roland said. “The core family has around two hundred members, but we also have thousands of branch family members. Some branches are a proper part of the family and worked within our businesses before the integration, but many also paved their own path.”

Zac nodded in understanding, but he wasn’t nearly as impressed as he would have been before the integration. A family consisting of thousands of members was extremely uncommon in the old world, but in the Multiverse it could barely be considered a clan.

With the increased life spans, families could grow extremely large, and many dynasties had hundreds of millions of members, according to Alyn. Even Clan Azh’Rezak had almost a million family members all told, and it was considered a small and newly established family. It would have gotten even more out of control if it weren’t for the fact that it apparently became harder to conceive a child the stronger one got.

“We’re still some ways away,” Roland added. “We’re heading to the old homestead. It is where the Marshall Clan was founded, and parts of its structures can be traced back all the way to the ninth century.”

Zac whistled, suitably impressed, though Calrin and the demons seemed a bit confused.

“Our history is extremely short, and our technology has pushed us forward. Finding a structure over a hundred years old is pretty impressive, let alone one over a thousand years,” Zac explained.

Soon the mansions gave way to large fields, and they drove on a solitary road toward a huge sprawling mansion in the distance. As they approached it, he started to wonder how a palace like this could be called a homestead.

It was a huge Palladian mansion that should have been built a few hundred years ago. Just a glance would tell anyone that it was thousands of square meters large, and Zac wouldn’t have been surprised if someone had told him it was a summer castle for the British royals back in the day.

However, there were also some new additions to the mansion. Three large side structures in matching design seemed to have been added quite recently, and one of them was still not quite finished. There was also a massive

building to the side that looked like a gargantuan spiraled seashell. It rose well over a hundred meters into the air, and Zac had a strong suspicion that this was the library that Thea had received.

Another small wall had been erected some distance from the compound, and it encompassed all the structures along with a sizeable garden. The wall wasn't even two meters tall, but Zac knew that it wasn't just decorative, as he could see a shimmer in the air above it. There was likely at least one array protecting the area, perhaps a full set of them.

"I think we might have a different definition of a homestead," Zac said to Roland, who shrugged with a smile.

DIFFERENT CHOICES

“Our founder, the first Baron Marshall, called his small manor the Old Homestead. Through the centuries, our family grew, and many expansions and remodels took place, but the name always stuck with us. The manor gained its current form in the late eighteenth century, though we have added quite a bit of real estate since the integration. Our family was spread all over the globe before the world changed, but we have worked hard to bring as many as possible home,” Roland explained.

When Emily heard his explanation, she immediately perked up.

“Have you mapped out the world by now? Do you know where all the cultivators from Allentown appeared?” she hurriedly asked before Zac could rein her in.

It wasn't that he didn't want Emily to find her two siblings, but rather that he didn't want to give the Marshall Clan too much information. His relations with Thea didn't necessarily extend to the rest of the family, and he didn't want Emily's brother and sister to end up as potential pawns in some political game.

“We looked around the area of the town, but that group seems to have been teleported to somewhere else on Earth,” Zac added calmly to explain what she meant.

“I can't say that we have a full grasp of our new world so far, but we have successfully mapped out most of our supercontinent. However, according to our astronomers, our planet is enormous, with a diameter of at least twenty times that of our old world,” Roland explained. “And according to our calculations, Pangea takes up only around 20% of the total surface.”

Zac was pretty shocked by the sheer size of their new planet. He knew

that Pangea was simply massive. The undead incursion was as large as the former United States, but it was only a small section of the massive continent. To think that such a huge chunk of land was only 20% of the total.

But it also made Zac more certain that the other landmass they recently discovered was another continent rather than a large island. Zac had even thought it possible that they simply had reached Pangea from both ends, but that one of the coasts was uninhabited.

“We have reason to believe that our continent isn’t the only one, though we still haven’t heard any news about another. Perhaps it’s simply a massive ocean,” Roland said, almost confirming Zac’s thoughts. “But mapping the great beyond has proven difficult. Our drones get taken down by huge birds, and our ships destroyed by frenzied sea life. In general, the Cosmic Energy causes great disturbance to transmitted signals.”

After asking a few questions to make sure he understood which city Emily was referring to, he tapped it into some app. But he didn’t speak for a few seconds, and Zac started to frown when he noticed his face. He quickly placed a hand on Emily’s arm for support.

“What is it?” Zac asked.

“Unfortunately... it seems they belong to one of the lost groups...” he hesitantly said before he looked up at Emily. “Young lady, do not give up hope, though. We still do not know the fate of the lost groups, and they may be alive and well.”

“Lost groups?” Zac said after seeing Emily being stunned silent. “What do you mean?”

“By now, we have mapped out roughly 98% of all Tutorial groups in the civilized world. That does not include regions with weak censuses, though where we can’t make accurate assumptions. Of the thousands of groups we and the New World Government have mapped, 23% are missing,” Roland said as he showed a graph on the tablet.

“We believe a few percent are missing due to the Zhix. We know for a fact that many groups with large Zhix presences were completely annihilated. Some made it with just a handful of survivors who managed to hide from the Zhix rampage during the quests,” Roland explained.

“But for the most part, we believe the missing groups be to related to the fourth race,” Roland said and threw an odd look at Alea. “So we believe that a quarter of the Tutorial groups have been moved to wherever the inhabitants of the fourth world reside, though their fates are unknown.”

Zac sighed and nodded in confirmation. He understood that look very well. The first time he'd introduced the demons, he said they were the fourth race to avoid trouble. But with the hunt, most of the larger organizations should have realized that the fourth race was the Molemen living in the underworld.

Zac hadn't met any humans from the underworld in the hunt, but between the Molemen and other hunters, there should have been hundreds of them appearing, and the information should have quickly spread.

Perhaps the Marshall Clan and the government were already trying to get in contact with the underworld to liberate the people or claim the riches. Still, since they were almost at the mansion, he didn't bring up the subject and instead turned to Emily.

"Don't worry, we will keep looking. Nothing is certain yet," Zac said, and Emily somberly nodded her head.

Not long after, they passed the manned gates as the two cars stopped right outside the doors. It was getting late, but floodlights kept the whole square in front of the manor completely lit, and multiple guards were making rounds.

Zac felt a bit out of place in this sort of luxurious environment, but being a top powerhouse instilled him with an air of confidence as they followed Roland inside. The others had much more varied expressions, and they ranged from slightly bored to gaping and loudly exclaiming at the opulence inside.

"Man, this place is creepy," Emily muttered. "This place is haunted for sure."

Zac coughed in embarrassment, but he inwardly agreed with the sentiment. He had already met ghosts since the integration, so he knew they were real. And if some existed on Earth, this old manor was a prime contender for being ghost central. The large hallway was stacked with antique relics, with everything from art to ancient weaponry and armors.

"Young lady, you might in fact be onto something," Roland said as he looked over with a smile. "Stories of hauntings in this manor have circulated for at least three hundred years. The Middle Ages were quite bloody, and some say resentment might have lingered. We have even brought in experts to make sure that we don't have any supernatural beings hiding in the attic now that the world is full of magic."

Emily paled a bit as she glanced around as she walked closer to Zac. It didn't look like she had expected her random remark to have such credence.

“You’ve made it,” a wizened voice suddenly echoed out through the doorway at the end of the hall, and when they entered, they found Henry Marshall standing in front of a table laden with documents. “We were starting to worry some complications had arisen. But when we noticed you had gained another level, we figured that you had found some opportunity.”

“The company you keep is still quite diverse,” the Marshall patriarch noted as he looked up from the stack of papers on the table.

“I haven’t changed my mind on that front since we last spoke,” Zac said as he accepted a glass of champagne from a waiter who soundlessly arrived with refreshments.

“There are a lot of new faces,” Henry said as he looked over the party until it stopped at Nonet. “Strength to your hive. I am Henry Marshall, leader of the Marshall Clan.”

“I am Nonet, Anointed of Hive Kundevi. Strength to your hive,” Nonet said with some surprise.

“I assume you joined Lord Atwood to reconvene with your brethren at the nearby hive?” Henry asked, drawing a simple nod from the Anointed. “I will have my men escort you at your convenience. If you could relay the message that we simply wish for peaceful co-existence, I would be in your debt. Our own tries at diplomacy have proven unfruitful.”

“I will relay the message to the council,” Nonet said without promising anything further.

Nonet was anxious to visit the hive, so Henry arranged for a convoy for Nonet and Ibtap, and the two immediately left the manor.

“Thea is not coming today?” Zac suddenly asked as he looked around.

There were only Henry and a handful of family members who seemed to act as advisors and aides in the large room. Thea was nowhere in sight, and neither was Billy for that matter.

“When she heard that you got delayed, she decided to head into the wilderness to fight. The beasts are progressing quite rapidly, and unless we regularly cull them, we would risk a beast tide. But mostly, it was her competitive spirit that wouldn’t let her sit still while you improved,” Henry explained with a smile. “Your large friend went with her.”

Zac nodded in understanding as he sat down at a table that could seat over twenty people. For a moment, he thought they were trying to hide Thea to avoid returning the items he’d lent her, but he felt that Thea wouldn’t go along with such a thing. A luxurious dinner was soon served, and the topics

were kept light. The family members from the Marshall Clan were great conversationalists, and it soon felt like a gathering of old friends.

Clearly, their goal was to dig out all kinds of information through the occasional and seemingly innocuous question, but everyone knew to keep quiet about sensitive matters. Besides, only Kenzie and Ogras knew of the truly sensitive intelligence on Port Atwood. Even Emily, who lived in his compound, had no idea about the true identity of the Creators.

After the dinner was over, Zac noted that Henry gave a sign to the servants, and they all left the room in quick order. Left were only Henry, four aides, and Zac's retinue.

"I hope that we will be able to forge a strong alliance between our forces during your visit and take the first step toward purging our planet from invaders," Henry began as his eyes swept toward Adran and Alea. "However, before that, there is something that I need clarified. I think you know what I am talking about."

"The demons?" Zac said with a smile.

As he expected, the issue cropped up almost immediately.

"The demons," Henry confirmed with a somber face.

"It is as you expect; they were once part of the incursion close to Port Atwood," Zac said. "As you might have heard from Thea, the integration left me alone on an island along with a demonkin incursion."

"I am not sure how clear your people are about the details, but after the conditions for closing an incursion are met, the invading force is given a grace period to escape through their Nexus Hub," Zac continued. "There was a group that chose to break ties with their old force and instead join me in founding Port Atwood."

"We are aware of the mechanics." Henry nodded. "However, you must understand the risk you are putting yourself and Earth in. In one hundred years, they will be able to contact their former clan, leading them back here at full force."

The two demons at the table threw Henry cold glances, but he completely ignored them.

"So what would you do if you were in my situation?" Zac asked.

"We were in your situation a short time ago when we finally managed to close the incursion that plagued the area. My granddaughter managed to assassinate a few of the leaders, allowing us to win the war. Most fled through the crystal when defeat was inevitable, but a few stayed on," Henry

explained, a ruthless glint shimmering in his eyes. “We killed them to the last man.”

Zac felt a shiver when he looked into Henry Marshall’s eyes. The old man was nowhere strong enough to be a threat to him, but Zac knew that he himself lacked such ruthlessness. Henry was ready to go to any length to protect his family and their interests, and Zac had a feeling that was what he was conveying by telling Zac about their handling of the incursion.

“Well, our situations were different. I needed people and information, and the demons provided both. Besides, they would be the first to get killed by their clan if they called them over,” Zac said. “As for how I handle the other incursions, that will depend on their actions.”

Besides, Zac already knew that the few D-grade powerhouses Clan Azh’Rezak possessed were right at the start of the grade. They had barely managed to pass the hurdle of forming their core, but they wouldn’t go any further on the path of cultivation.

Only the clan leader and the supreme elder were slightly better. There was no way that they would be able to mount an assault on Earth unless their planets for some reason became neighbors through some cosmic joke.

The atmosphere in the room started to become quite heavy, and the advisors threw Henry worried looks. They were no doubt unhappy about an escalating conflict, especially when Thea was out hunting. But suddenly, Henry reclined in his chair with a shrug.

“The strong make the rules. Such is our reality now, and the rest will have to accept it and adapt. This brings us to another issue. Have you been able to connect with the underworld?” the old man said.

Zac was slightly thrown off by the change in subject, but the two were connected in a sense. Since Henry had stepped back on the issue of the demons, then so would he.

“No. Either their teleporters are not public or there is something else causing interference,” Zac said with a shake of his head.

He still didn’t feel it was time to disclose his theory of the second continent.

“You should know that most forces are currently desperately digging downward to connect with the underworld. The fact that there are massive riches has spread far and wide because of a few bigmouthed hunters,” Henry said with a sigh. “It’s a modern-day gold rush, and many are even ignoring the threats of the incursions.”

CULTIVATION

“No one has been able to connect to the underworld yet?” Zac asked.

“Not to our knowledge,” one of the aides said with a shake of his head. “There are speculations that there is some layer far down into the ground that hinders the teleportation arrays. Others even believe that the underworld is in fact on one of the moons.”

Zac first looked at the man with skepticism, but upon further consideration, he felt it wasn't too far-fetched. Their new planet had three moons now, and while none of them looked like a proper planet, there was nothing saying that it wasn't possible to survive underground up there. Perhaps his theory of the underworld being beneath the other continent was completely wrong.

But something told Zac this wasn't the case. It would be extremely odd if an incursion was placed on one of the moons. How were they supposed to close it if that was the case? His theory felt much more promising. But for now, he kept his thoughts to himself. And, of course, none of his people would explain the situation either.

Henry seemed intent on sounding out Zac's thoughts about the coming battles, but Zac still hadn't decided on his course of action and kept his intentions vague. Besides, he did not want to make large decisions while both Thea and Billy were absent.

It was already well past midnight, and Zac was starting to feel tired since he had come here straight from the inheritance trial. So he instead said he needed to cultivate, and he excused himself from the table. Emily had turned quieter during the evening, likely thinking about her siblings, and she excused herself as well.

No one slept a lot any more with their improved constitution, so Zac left Adran and Calrin to accompany Henry and his aides to discuss the details of their alliance instead. Alea chose to stay behind as well as a liaison for the military arm of Port Atwood. A group of maids waited outside, and Zac and Emily were shown to their rooms.

Zac's living quarters was a huge suite comprised of five rooms. There were two separate bedrooms, a living room, and what seemed to be cultivation chambers. When Zac entered, he was surprised to note that the density of Cosmic Energy was slightly higher inside compared to the outside. He also sensed that the walls were extremely thick, providing great isolation.

There even was a high-quality air-control function inside that kept the air just right. The increased density didn't make any difference for a mortal like Zac, but it undoubtedly felt nicer to reside in more energy-rich areas. Zac closed the door behind him and noted with some interest there was even a Do Not Disturb button by the door.

He had to admit that the Marshall Clan had gone a very interesting route where they combined their old lifestyle with the integration, creating something unique for themselves. That was also made apparent from their effort to incorporate inscriptions in modern items.

Port Atwood was to a far greater degree adapted to the general state of the Multiverse, and Zac realized there were almost no modern items in his private courtyard anymore.

It almost felt as though he were inside a sensory deprivation chamber from the moment he closed the door, and he had no trouble calming his mind. Zac usually preferred to sit in his courtyard to meditate while listening to nature, but this experience was nice as well.

The first problem he wanted to take a minute to ponder upon was what he should do in regard to Yrial's advice regarding his Dao.

The earlier he decided which of the paths he would take, the better. That would allow him to try to gain suitable insights for his Daos as he pushed them toward Peak mastery. As he saw it, there were three alternatives to take rather than the two Yrial had mentioned. He could also go for only two Dao Groups in addition to three or four.

The final option would be where took his fusions one step further and created one group of life and defense, with the other group representing death and attack. That would reflect the two top-tier Daos, Creation and Oblivion. But he quickly discarded this path as he took out **[Verun's Bite]**. Zac slowly

dragged his fingers across the large axe-head, and he felt a small resonance in his mind.

Zac had held an axe in his hand since the integration took place, and it had become a part of him. He couldn't imagine giving up the path of the axe in favor of only focusing on the two elements of life and death, so he gave up on the idea of only having two Dao Groups. Besides, he felt that doing so might result in his following classes becoming even more lopsided.

After some hesitation, he also decided to give up on having a fourth group, one solely dedicated to defense. He didn't have any connection to a shield like he did with an axe, and pushing for that Dao wasn't something he felt was too important.

He would shore up his defense with the help of massive attributes, skills, and Hybrid Daos instead. That left the original suggestion that Yrial had put forth. The Dao of Corpse didn't sound too appealing to him, but Yrial said there would be other alternatives as well.

He spent a few hours consolidating his improved Dao Seeds. He had very little experience with the Seed of Rot, and he knew that he would have to battle it out a bit while using it to test its might. He also taught himself both **[Cyclic Strike]** and his Transformation skill.

Yrial's transformation skill formed a layer around the core like a converter between the core itself and his pathways, and Zac realized he would need to either infuse it with the Dao of Trees or Dao of Rot if he wanted to change his form. **[Cyclic Strike]** was a bit more unique though.

The skill was the first one he had encountered that was comprised of two fractals, one on each of his shoulders. He was worried for a second he would need to use both his arms for the attack, but after channeling the two Daos into their respective fractals, he realized that wasn't the case.

He did, however, realize that he was unable to completely activate the fractals. A very delicate balance was needed between the two Daos, and if Zac didn't control his energies exactly right, the skill would fizzle out immediately. This was only exacerbated by the fact that the two Dao Seeds he used weren't of the same grade.

He frowned a bit, knowing he wouldn't be able to use his new skill in the short run. But he understood what Yrial had meant that this skill would help him improve his control of his Dao.

Infusing a skill with Dao was straightforward enough, and it used two components; his Mental Energy and his Dao. The Mental Energy was

essentially like Cosmic Energy, flavorless and without any attunement. His insights into his Daos transformed the blank slate of Mental Energy into something with meaning, and this new energy could be used to empower attacks.

Of course, as with everything else, there were varying degrees of skill related to this process, much like with everything else. At the moment he only pumped his attacks full of his mental energy, but this skill required far more sophistication. The biggest difference was that it required him to infuse a skill with two Daos at once, something he had never accomplished before.

It almost felt like his brain was being split apart while attempting to maintain the balance, like he was trying to perform two vastly different tasks with both his left and right hands. It required some affinity for doing multiple things simultaneously, but it was proving more than difficult.

Hopefully, it was just a matter of his lack of experience, rather than a result of his abysmal affinities that it was proving too daunting a task at the moment.

Since there would be no quick results from [**Cyclic Strike**], Zac instead turned his attention toward the transformation skill. But before he tried to activate it, he stopped himself as he looked around. He took a second look at the ceiling and all the corners for any hidden spying devices before sitting down again. But even then he put on a cowl to cover his face just to make sure.

Content that there was no one spying on him, he infused the fractal with the Dao of Rot, and he felt a decent amount of Cosmic Energy getting dragged into the fractal as well. The next moment small lines of energies connected with the core, and Zac immediately sensed the change.

Miasma immediately started to flood his system, and he almost fell, even though he was already sitting. At the same time, his Cosmic Energy was quickly getting absorbed by the core, and it was as though a cycle had formed where the death-attuned energy was driving all normal energy out of his body and into the Duplicity Core.

A wave of nausea hit Zac, but he held on and kept infusing the skill with the Dao of Rot. Luckily Yrial's estimations had been correct, and the change only took around ten seconds. He opened his status screen to be sure, and he had truly changed to his Draugr form.

It was the first time he had the opportunity to properly observe the transformation, and it was pretty interesting. It wasn't only the energies that

changed, but something else was dragged out of his body and pushed into his core. In its stead, his organs were filled with something else.

It was the change of this mysterious force that was the difference between vibrant red blood and the black sludge that now sat in his veins. He had no idea what it was since he couldn't sense it properly. At least he felt it was something completely different compared to life force and Miasma. In the end, he could only chalk it up to be the essence of the respective races.

There was thankfully no trouble in learning the two skills in his undead form either. The transformation skill had already been adapted for his dual races by Yrial, whereas the attack was mainly powered by the Daos.

Since he was already in his undead form, he decided to test something that had been on his mind for days. He quickly took out the cultivation manual that Mhal had left behind. Zac already had learned how to utilize a manual from listening to Alyn and his sister and knew exactly what to do to see whether he was a cultivator in this form.

It didn't seem that the undead manuals were any different, apart from running on Miasma instead of Cosmic Energy. The first thing he did was to take out and crush a few Miasma Crystals to fill the cultivation chamber with death-attuned energy. Next, he looked down at the manual and tried to start it up.

The first step to cultivation was slightly confusing to Zac, as it was to "connect with the universe," as Kenzie had explained it.

By pushing his Miasma in the specific pattern of the manual, a rotation would be formed through his pathways. This rotation would, in turn, connect the energy outside the body with the energy inside, and as the rotation kept going, some of the external energy would be dragged inside through his pores and join his internal energy.

Rotating the Miasma didn't prove difficult, as he had ample experience of moving energy through his body to utilize his skills. But no matter how many revolutions he performed following the cultivation manual, nothing happened. His internal energy was completely cut off from the Miasma in the room.

Not even holding a Miasma Crystal helped in the least, even though he had seen Thea regain her energies a lot faster that way. Zac even expelled a bunch of Miasma to test whether the manual could at least help him restore his energies faster.

But Zac's final hope was dashed when revolving his energy didn't help in

the slightest to improve his missing Miasma. Some Miasma continuously seeped into his body, as it always did when he wasn't topped off, but cultivating made absolutely no difference on the rate of absorption.

Finally, he had to reluctantly give up on the rotation. If he was a cultivator, he would almost immediately have started to absorb energy. There was no such thing as "sensing the Cosmic Energy" for months until a connection could be made. It was an instant change, where the only difference over time was the amount of energy one could drag into one's body.

It looked like he wasn't meant to cultivate, even in his Draugr form. He had honestly known this was a very real possibility after meeting Yrial, but it was still a disappointment. Zac shook his head with a wry smile, realizing he might be the only Draugr in the Multiverse without any inherent connection to Miasma.

Since he was done with everything he wanted to check out in his undead form, he decided to change back to a human. He crushed a Divine Crystal in the room next, making the life-attuned energies cancel out the Miasma to some degree. The rest would naturally be diluted and eradicated by the ambient energies in the air.

But when Zac tried to change back, he was immediately stopped.

He soon learned that the transformation skill refused to activate for almost an hour until he could change again. It appeared that freely swapping back and forth still was impossible. But with some timing and subterfuge, it should at least be possible to swap once during a battle, though it couldn't be done if he was completely exhausted since it required a decent amount of mental energy.

For the rest of the night, he kept going over his experiences and his Daos, trying to decide on the best path for himself. He only took a short nap of two hours before he resumed his meditation. He lost track of time until, suddenly, a subdued chime could be heard in the room, gently bringing him out of his meditation.

It seemed the Marshalls had installed a doorbell of sorts to alert the person cultivating. Zac stood up with a grunt and opened the chamber to the outside world. To his surprise, he found Thea standing right outside. A quick glance at the time showed it was almost noon, making his mouth slightly widen in surprise.

"You're an addict," Thea said with a shake of her head as she pointedly

looked at the unused bedrooms before a small smile spread across her face.

PERUSING THE LIBRARY

“Aren’t you the same?” Zac smiled. “I heard you went out hunting during the night? Isn’t Billy with you?”

“With you gaining so many levels, I can’t relax,” she said with some annoyance, though Zac knew she didn’t really mean it. “Besides, it seems the beasts are getting more aggressive.

“Billy won’t be joining us today. He heard we were going to the library and decided to sleep in. Did you know he can cultivate while sleeping?” she then added as she looked inside the cultivation chamber with a slightly confused look.

Zac guessed she sensed the odd mixture of attuned energies inside since they hadn’t completely dissipated, and he hurriedly closed the door behind him. It was only after he got out he had time to digest what she said. Zac didn’t know how to respond to something like that; he had never heard of anything like it. Billy was truly one of a kind.

“Is that even possible?” Zac said.

“Apparently,” Thea said with a shrug. “Between you and me, I think Billy might have some special constitution or bloodline. Even I could see his huge form when he smashed the array back in the hunt.”

Zac agreed with Thea’s guess, remembering Billy’s golden blood and the ancient aura he’d emitted in his titanic form. Bloodlines and special constitutions were things that Zac still was a bit confused about, though. Could one just gain them willy-nilly?

“Give me a second to change,” Zac said and hurried to the bathroom.

He felt a bit silly wearing the golden robes from Tyrbat back on Earth. It was one thing back in Port Atwood since he was usually alone cultivating or

battling, but it was different here. He took a quick shower and put on his new Spirit Tool robes instead.

The clothes adjusted to fit him perfectly, and they felt extremely luxuriant. After checking himself in the mirror, he had to say that he looked a lot better in the tasteful battle robes compared to the gaudy defensive suit the Medhin royals seemed to prefer.

Zac even considered growing out the stubble on his head to a longer hairstyle like Yrial, but in the end, decided against it before he got out. Thea gave him a once-over with her eyes, her brows rising slightly when she saw the intricate fractals drawn in red and blue.

“Looks nice. I still have the things I owe you, but space here is a bit cramped,” she said and led him out toward a garden out back.

The two kept making some small talk while they walked until they reached a secluded garden behind the huge mansion. The moment they arrived, Thea immediately summoned a small mountain of treasures, but he was a bit curious to note that they seemed to have been sorted.

“Truth be told, we went through the items, but I promise that not a single thing is missing. I oversaw everything,” Thea said before she looked over at a few crates. “There are a few things we would like to purchase from you that we found in this pile.”

“Port Atwood is always happy to oblige in some trade, provided the price is right.” Calrin’s voice suddenly could be heard across the garden.

Zac almost jumped into the air in shock, since the voice had come straight out of nowhere. He quickly looked around to find Calrin standing just a few meters away. He saw Zac’s shocked face and gave a small bow.

“I smelled treasure,” the Sky Gnome said as he walked over to the pile that Thea had indicated. “I wonder what Miss Marshall would use in exchange for these treasures. You should know that Port Atwood currently lacks nothing apart from exotic treasures.”

“What are you doing here?” Thea said as she looked down at Calrin as he started rummaging through the things they wanted to keep.

“It appears our business interests have met a snag here in Westfort, so I had some free time to help out my good friend,” Calrin pointedly said. “Now these are some valuable items; no wonder your force would want to buy them.”

Some annoyance started to appear on Thea’s face, and she turned toward Zac. However, business was business, so Zac only shrugged with a small

smile as he let the two battle it out. He trusted Calrin's discerning eye. The gnome would neither let a real treasure slip through his fingers nor take a loss on the items he was ready to sell off.

In the end, Calrin staunchly refused the sale of two large crates of herbs, but he was ready to haggle for the rest. Zac didn't recognize those plants at all, but they weren't bad since they emitted pretty dense energies. As for the rest, it was sold for 124 million Nexus Coins that would be paid in three installments. At this point, Zac made sure that the money would go to him rather than the insatiable little gnome since this deal did not go through the Thayer Consortium.

The price itself seemed somewhat low, but it came with some strings attached. It appeared that the business venture that Starlight backed was also aiming to set up a branch in Westfort, and the Marshall Clan was happy to have the two businesses duke it out and provide better benefits.

Calrin managed to get a three-month head start through this deal, barring the Flowing Moon Corporation from doing business at all during that period. Three months wasn't too much, but it was also a critical period on Earth. Large wars would take place, and Thayer Consortium would be able to unload its enormous stockpiles of equipment to the Marshalls and their allies.

Calrin's original intention was for commercial monopoly, though, just like he enjoyed in Port Atwood, but that was staunchly refused by Thea. Zac found that she was almost a completely different person when it came to business, and she gave the little Sky Gnome quite the workout.

Zac was also interested to see that Thea had no problems deciding these things on the spot, meaning that she might enjoy a similar status as himself in the clan. Zac let others handle most issues, but he always had the final say. Zac had assumed that Henry was calling all the shots since the family seemed to run like in the old world, but perhaps that wasn't completely the case.

After they were done with the negotiations, Calrin dragged him to the side.

"That's a good one. Finding a wife with a talent for management will allow a man to adventure with peace of mind," Calrin said with a satisfied nod.

"Great." Zac sighed with a roll of his eyes. "What were those herbs you kept?"

"They are called [**Cosmic Bloodroot**] and are used to improve one's constitution. Together with the [**Aetherbloom**] we attained from New

Washington and a few other ingredients, we will be able to make extremely potent medicinal baths to move constitutions toward D-grade,” the gnome excitedly said.

Zac whistled in surprise. That was something that Port Atwood currently lacked. It wouldn't be long before both himself and a handful of the demons reached E-grade, and having this would motivate them to contribute even harder.

After saying goodbye to Calrin, he rejoined Thea as they walked toward the enormous seashell. Now that it wasn't pitch-black outside, he could see that it was a deep blue and shimmered like it was inlaid with crystals all along the surface.

“It was initially built by an aquatic species, but the System remodeled it to work aboveground, it seems,” Thea explained as they moved forward. “The librarian is a bit angry about it, though; it does not like non-marine beings. We found that unless you are quite specific in your requests, it might try to trip you up.”

Zac coughed as he threw Thea an odd glance. He was starting to form a guess about the System. It was the largest employer in the universe and had multiple sales channels. Was it awarding slightly broken or troublesome things for quests because it had trouble pawning them off to more established forces? The only exception seemed to be the Creator shipyard, though he knew that both Rahm and Karunthel seemed a bit odd, even for being Creators.

As they got closer to the entrance of the library, Zac spotted a familiar figure sitting on a bench nearby, enjoying the sun. He felt a headache incoming but still chose to walk over with Thea curiously following in tow.

“What are you doing here?” Zac asked with some helplessness.

“The library sounded quite interesting. In contrast to Ogras and the others, I come from humble beginnings and never had a formal education. I wanted to see if I could join you inside,” Alea said with a smile as she looked over at Thea.

“This is Alea, one of the leaders of the demons,” Zac introduced her to Thea. “Alea, this is Thea Marshall.”

“Hi, if you're a friend of Zac's, you're welcome to join,” Thea said with a nod.

Zac internally breathed in relief when he saw that the poison mistress wasn't here to cause any trouble, and walked toward the library. The moment

he stepped inside, all sounds from the outside disappeared, and he was filled with a sense of tranquility as he looked around the magnificent building.

There were no ceilings in the shell, and he could see up to the top of the spiral. Lining the walls were innumerable bookcases and floating crystals, and they kept going along the spirals all the way to the top. The bottom floor was also studded with reading nooks and comfortable sofas, the latter seemingly an addition of the Marshalls. Zac also noted that there was at least one shimmering partition some ways up, which slightly distorted the vision.

“It seems I need to pass a certain trial to unlock the top-tier information crystals,” Thea explained as she looked up at the layer. “Until then, we can only browse what’s beneath.”

“So how do you find what you’re looking for?” Zac asked as he looked around. There were hundreds of bookshelves on just the ground floor, but not a single sign anywhere.

“Ask Big Blue,” Thea said.

“Huh?” Zac said, but the next moment, an enormous monster appeared in front of him.

It was like something wrought out of a Lovecraftian nightmare, a monstrous head with hundreds of long tentacles. Dozens of pitch-black eyes stared down at them, the largest as large as a beach ball. Zac immediately took out his axe in alarm, and Alea looked ready to drown the whole area in poison as she turned her eyes toward Thea.

“Wait!” Thea said. “That’s the librarian!”

Zac hesitantly looked up at the enormous monster reaching almost ten meters into the air, and he couldn’t believe this thing was a keeper of knowledge.

“New bipedals soil my sanctuary. You even bring the barbaric demonkin this time? Base creatures that only know lust and violence,” a rumbling voice echoed out through the library as the large head of the librarian turned away in annoyance.

“It has worked well for us so far,” Alea said with a smile, but there was a dangerous glint in her eyes.

“I’m sorry, just ignore Big Blue. He has some personality problems, but he is very knowledgeable. Just ask him what you want to learn more about, and he will get it for you,” Thea explained with a helpless smile.

Zac nodded and simply asked about the Undead Empire to start with. Zac had honestly already figured out most things that were bothering him inside

the trial already, meaning this place wasn't as valuable to him anymore. But he still had a day to spend while Adran and Calrin hammered out the details of the cooperation agreements with the Marshall Clan and Nonet visited the other hive.

So he chose to shore up his knowledge of various fields during the day. He got a better understanding of how the Multiverse worked, for example, and he was shocked by the immensity of it all even if he was somewhat prepared.

One theoretically could understand that the Multiverse was boundless, but such a thing was too abstract. But when one began to get down to detail, it started to get insane. For example, a single undead family could control hundreds of thousands of planets, yet they would only be the drop in the ocean of the Undead Empire. Even an C-grade powerhouse might die of old age before having visited every planet.

But even though the universe held boundless planets and things to see, it seemed that interplanetary travel was not something that more than a fraction of people would experience in their lifetimes. No matter if one lived on an F- or D-grade world, most would never leave their planet, much less their sector. It was both an issue of danger and resources.

To travel between planets in a local cluster, you needed at least a D-grade Cosmic Ship unless you possessed teleportation access. Those ships could utilize the Dao of Space to move faster than light, making it possible to traverse those massive distances. But you needed higher-grade ships to travel outside of the local cluster.

That might not seem like much, considering Zac would be able to build those things sooner or later through his Creator shipyard, but it seemed like crafting vessels that could traverse the Multiverse were both immensely difficult and prohibitively expensive. Even a C-grade Craftsman might struggle to create a D-grade vessel because it required so many types of knowledge and rare materials.

Even worse, D-grade Cosmic Vessels were simply not enough to freely explore the Multiverse. A C-grade ship was needed to travel with some degree of freedom within a "Sector," which seemed to be the Multiverse equivalent of a galaxy.

These sectors were the next barriers to travel, and even peak elites were unlikely to ever leave the sector they were born in. For example, it turned out that all the forces invading Earth were from the same Sector, though probably not the same local cluster of planets.

The author of the book theorized that the System wanted to find a balance between safety for newly integrated planets, but at the same time waste a minimal amount of energy for the trials. So it didn't want forces in too close a proximity to invade, but it also didn't want to teleport people too far.

Of course, there were some exceptions to this. Some forces were just so massive that they existed all over the place, having pockets of control across hundreds, perhaps thousands, of these Sectors. The Undead Empire was one such example, and there were a few more massive empires and alliances like that as well.

The fact that the System didn't search too far for enemies to send to Earth meant that the risk of running into those forces behind the incursions in the future was a lot higher than Zac previously expected. A few of them might even be reachable with a D-grade Cosmic Vessel after the protective shroud was lifted.

"It's shocking, isn't it?" Thea suddenly said from the side. "I read that same crystal a few days after I got this place. The scale of it all is unbelievable."

Zac nodded in agreement. But what Zac really was thinking about was what would happen to him after he offended every single incursion by killing their leaders and forcing the rest to flee in shame.

Would he even be able to leave the planet in the future?

DIVISION OF LABOR

Zac shook his head with a wry smile before he put aside the information crystal. He would need to survive the incursions, Dominators, and the Great Redeemer before he could worry about potential vendettas with various factions in the Multiverse.

The next hours were spent with Zac going over any subject that he could think of. One small regret was that the library was extremely old, and any information about forces would have to be taken with a grain of salt. For example, there was no mention of the Allbright Empire in the library, though Zac didn't know if that was due to the empire being too young or that the library could only hold so much information.

But the most interesting crystal he found was a biography of a mortal warrior who managed to reach C-grade. It mostly centered on his exploits and experiences, but some snippets gave insights into the hurdles a Defier would encounter.

As Zac suspected, the general method of Galvarion, the aquatic mortal, to break through his nodes was to force them open. It took him almost a hundred years to reach the Peak E-grade, most of it spent on a sickbed from his wounds. It had taken him another 150 years to heal his foundations until he even dared to attempt to form his core.

As he read through the history of Galvarion, Zac also started to understand Alyn's standpoint regarding Class Rarities better. Galvarion had only possessed an Epic C-grade class, the lowest possible rarity if one wanted to progress further.

In fact, it had been the same from the start for the man. He started with a humble Warrior class at F-grade and slowly upgraded the rarity once every

Evolution. He wasn't supremely strong for his level, though better than most through a series of fortuitous encounters.

But he was still looked down at by the elite forces in the area, and a few enmities had resulted in him almost dying multiple times over. But Galvarion always remembered the grudges as he slunk away, only returning when he had become stronger.

Soon after evolving to C-grade, he completely eradicated six D-grade forces that had crossed him over the past thousands of years. That went to show that the rarity of a class wasn't nearly as important as the grade.

The bonus attributes he got now from an Epic class wouldn't make much difference when Zac was a D-grade powerhouse, and Zac started to wonder if he was doing the right thing by aiming for the highest rarities possible. But Yrial had never mentioned anything about the subject, so he decided to stick with his gut.

He would ask the Lord of Cycles the next time they met just in case, but he knew that the extra attributes were only a small part of what the better classes brought to the table. Instead, he kept going through various information crystals to get a better basic understanding of the Multiverse and cultivation in general.

It was only around 5 p.m. that Alea spoke up.

"We have a meeting in thirty minutes," she said. "A council for the upcoming war."

A groan escaped from Zac's lips, and Thea looked less than enthused as well. Both of them had turned into people of action from their experiences following the integration, and these meetings had turned into torture. But there was nothing to be done about it. Some big decisions needed to be made, and Zac needed to be present for them. So they simply took a small walk in the garden before entering the conference room.

Zac sat down with the other people from Port Atwood, nodding at Calrin. He knew this meeting would be a real marathon, and he got flashbacks from the monthly meetings back at the office that never led anywhere. Zac had shortly spoken with Adran and Alea just before entering, and the negotiations so far hadn't been without its issues.

He would have thought that everything would be easy sailing since his side was negotiating from a side of absolute power, but the wily diplomats had a million ways to slightly gain small advantages for themselves if his side wasn't alert.

A glance across the table told him that Thea was as bored as himself, and she even looked ready to fall asleep. But a cough from Henry woke her right up as he convened the meeting.

“Welcome all. As you know, the objective of today’s meeting is to formalize the coming war effort. With the benefits garnered from the hunt, we will never be any more ready than now. We also know that the restrictions are rapidly weakening on the invading forces, and the amount of support they can bring through the Nexus Hubs will increase. Time is of the essence,” Henry began, drawing nods from around the table.

“There is another reason for urgency,” his closest aide continued as he turned on a large monitor. “The Undead Empire is on the move.”

The screen showed aerial shots of massive hordes of undead walking through some fields. The numbers were on a completely different level compared to what Zac had encountered during his visit to the Dead Zone. The countless bodies turned the army into a sea, and it was impossible to make a correct estimation, but there were millions and millions as they stretched out toward the horizon.

Certainly, almost all of them were low-leveled Zombies, but they were still a huge threat. Even Zac would run out of steam long before he managed to grind down such a terrifying number of enemies. And others weren’t like Zac with his 800 Endurance. The Zombies were extremely aggressive, and one bite was all it took against most fighters. They didn’t care if twenty of the Zombies were hacked to bits as long as one of them could wound a living person.

“What of the Monastery of Everlasting Peace?” Zac asked as he opened his Town Menu.

He breathed out in relief as he saw the teleporter to the monastery was still active, hopefully meaning they were fine.

“For now, they are only cordoned off, but we believe a siege will start in earnest sooner or later,” the man said as he pushed the button on a remote to show a few more screenshots of the armies. “The main hordes extend outward in three directions as it stands, and we believe that all of them have great powerhouses in the lead.”

“One of the hordes is moving toward the reorganized strongholds of China, Korea, and India. This force could be seen as an ally of ours, though we haven’t entered official negotiations,” Henry elaborated. “They mostly started approaching us recently due to the movements of the undead. But

another reason is that the New World Government has proven to be an extremely flaky ally for them. They have been promised assistance with the incursion for months, but the government has only made a symbolic show of effort.”

“What about the other hordes?” Zac asked.

“One of them is heading toward the European heartlands,” the aide explained and opened up a map of the central region of Pangea. “This horde would cause widespread damage to both the New World Government, a large number of Ishiate settlements, and many of our allies. Even Westfort would be implicated if they aren’t stopped within a month or two.”

“The final group is moving toward one of the incursions,” Henry finished. “That horde we’ll leave alone. Let the aliens weaken each other. But the other two hordes must be dealt with.”

“So what is the plan?” Thea asked from the side, looking at the map with a frown.

“The two hordes must be whittled down before we can assault the core of the incursion,” Henry said. “Otherwise we would run the risk of getting trapped inside. There are still tens of millions of Zombies guarding the core, so we believe there will be a protracted siege to break it down.”

“This is where the visible part of our operation will take place,” another aide explained. “Armies run by the Marshall Clan, Port Atwood, and our other allies will join forces to battle the enormous monster hordes that threaten native settlements. It will protect our interests, garner respect with the civilian populations, and provide our fighters with a source of Cosmic Energy. We only need a number of powerhouses to offset the danger that the more powerful undead pose.”

Zac shook his head at the cynical explanation of why they would mobilize the forces.

“Do you not agree with the proposal, Lord Atwood?” the aide asked.

“We are fighting for the survival of our planet. Do we really need other reasons to mobilize?” Zac sighed.

“The opinion of the population is very important even in our current world,” Henry said, though the demons weren’t convinced either.

Zac was also slightly unconvinced, but he motioned Henry to go on with the plan.

“We will use both old-world weaponry and Cosmic Energy to destroy these hordes. And if we can’t completely destroy them, we will hopefully

weaken them enough to stall their approach. The undead have officially been declared to be an enemy of Earth, no matter their previous identities,” Henry continued. “But in the end, this war is only a diversion.”

Alea and Adran threw a glance at Zac, who looked a bit confused at this point.

“An all-out war is a diversion?” Zac probed.

“We have to face reality. No matter how many of our ordinary warriors we throw into the midst of war these days, it doesn’t matter,” Henry said. “The fate of a nation rests on the shoulders of those at the apex.”

Zac slowly nodded in agreement. Unless one could take out the leaders of a force, it could always be rebuilt. If someone attacked Port Atwood, he could simply retreat and return with a vengeance whenever he was prepared. It was the same with the incursions.

“They want you to close the other incursions while they fight the Zombies,” Alea explained. “And they want it to be a secret operation so no one will learn of your deeds.”

Zac looked at Henry, who made no effort to refute Alea’s claim.

“That is correct. Our plan hinges on the monstrous power you have. You alone are more important than all our soldiers. There is no way for us to close any incursions without massive casualties. We would run out of manpower after just two or three of them. But you and a small support group would be able to go in, kill all the leaders, and then force the rest to retreat,” Henry said.

“We would provide the logistics, and you would ideally go from incursion to incursion, destroying as many as possible before any news could spread between the invaders. We have already set up outposts close to every single incursion by now,” another Marshall family member added.

“And guess who they want to lead the armies and win the adoration of the world?” Alea added with an acerbic tone as she turned her gaze to Thea, who frowned before looking over at her grandfather.

“Thea is the best candidate for the job,” Henry said with equanimity. “One powerhouse is needed to make sure one of the Undead Empire generals doesn’t start a massacre. Your prowess is already needed with the incursion. Billy Trask Jr. is not suited for a leadership role due to his unique mental state. Enigma and Joker are suspected to be in the Underworld. Daoist Chosui and Guru Anaad Phakiwar are holding down the fort for the Sino-Indian Alliance. Silverfox is believed to be part of the New World Government.

That leaves Thea.”

Zac had to admit that what Henry said made some sense, but that still only covered one of the two armies.

“The other two and I can lead the other army,” Alea suddenly said. “The three of us are far deadlier together than Ms. Marshall is alone.”

Zac immediately understood that Alea was referring to Janos and Ilvere, and he felt it wasn’t a bad idea. Ilvere was a skilled commander, while Alea was just extremely effective against large groups of enemies.

“Do your and Janos’ skill sets work against the undead?” Zac asked to make sure.

“Janos can’t do much against the brainless undead, but the leaders are the same as humans. I won’t face any obstacles with either,” Alea said.

The others curiously looked at the two, hoping for an explanation.

“That’s fine with me,” Zac said. “Three of my generals will lead one army while Thea leads the other. That way, we can properly cover both the hordes.”

“Will you not need them for the incursions?” Henry asked. “We can also provide a few elite squads to provide backup.”

“That won’t be needed,” Zac said with a shake of his head. “I have Ogras and my own elite soldiers for that.”

Truthfully, he wouldn’t have minded some backup, but Zac was planning on using his undead form when possible to grind a few levels. He didn’t want a bunch of people from other forces snooping on him and reporting back.

“You should bring Billy as well,” Henry said after a brief pause. “Our investigation showed that almost all of the incursions have set up strong defensive arrays. Billy is uniquely gifted at dealing with that.”

Zac nodded in agreement. No one was as clear as himself just how powerful that strike was. Many of the details got hammered out over the following two hours, and Zac received an information package containing the gathered intelligence of the remaining incursions. Some of them were completely unknown to Zac from before and placed in extremely remote regions of Pangea. The Marshall Clan was truly thorough.

He was also happy he had some other negotiators by his side. Adran made sure that the area of every single incursion that Port Atwood conquered would become part of their land, apart from the undead incursion. That place was too large to handle in any case, and it would perhaps take centuries for the Dead Zone to heal.

“What about the New World Government?” Zac suddenly asked. “Won’t they assist us?”

“They are currently mobilizing their armies, but I would not count on them for the incursions,” Henry said with disdain. “Their two top powerhouses aren’t strong enough to take down even the weakest of the incursions now that the restrictions have become so lax. Besides, I am not sure if they even want to.”

“What do you mean?” Zac asked with some confusion.

“We have reason to believe that the New World Government, or at least a core group of its leaders, has allied with the so-called Dominators of the Zhix.”

CHANGING COURSE

“WHAT?” Zac exclaimed with anger. “Why the hell would they do that?”

“Control and self-preservation, I would guess,” Henry said. “After learning about the Great Redeemer from Thea, we believe that the Dominators have promised them sanctuary in exchange for subservience. That they will be spared when that monster arrives. Either that or they simply needed strong allies against you and my granddaughter. They might not even believe the Great Redeemer to be real.”

“They would have to be crazy to jump into bed with those things. Even crazier than regular Zhix,” Zac said with disbelief.

“Perhaps. Or perhaps they simply feel out of options. The Dominators are already so much stronger than them. What about a Peak D-grade powerhouse? They likely believe there is no way for us to prevail, and took a desperate gamble to get a shot at surviving,” Henry said. “People will go to extraordinary lengths to survive.”

“Is that why Thomas Fischer is improving so rapidly?” Zac asked.

“Yes, we believe that the Dominators have provided him with some sort of opportunities. He has always been strong, but he had shown not only a rapid gain in level but also a power that belies that level lately. He also cleansed a large part of the New World Government shortly before entering the hunt. It is still officially a democratic alliance of free states, but it is more or less an autocracy by now. The official explanation was to rid the cabinet of the shape-shifters, but a fair deal of humans were put to death as well,” Henry continued.

“Will they actively work against us?” Zac said.

“I discussed this with your assistants yesterday. We believe, same as you,

that the Dominators wish for the incursions to be closed. So we will likely not encounter resistance at this stage. However, we should be ready for a civil war the moment the foreign threat is dealt with,” Henry said. “You have already been painted as a traitor of humanity due to the company you keep. They might launch assaults at us under the guise of emancipation from the final threat, and they would be assisted by the Zhix hordes.”

“Not all of the hordes,” Zac said. “The council of the Anointed is preparing for a final holy war against the Dominators. Where do the Ishiate stand?”

“They have been neutral so far,” one of the advisors answered. “Not even Starlight seems to have a great drawing power with their people, and they generally stay in small cliques. That is why Everglade Refuge was forced to open their teleporter to the public, even though they are a decent-sized settlement.”

“So we are pretty much alone.” Zac sighed.

“Our forces are a bit smaller, but we have more elites,” Henry said. “But it would help our side if we were the ones who discovered and liberated the underworld.”

“What about Salvation?” Zac said, changing the topic. “Do we know where the Cradle of God is located?”

“It has been located, but...” one of the aides started, “we believe that attacking that man at the moment would be at least as dangerous as attacking one of the top-tier incursions.”

“It doesn’t matter; we need to prioritize killing him,” Zac said without hesitation. “He’s turning people into weapons, and he is a real disciple of the Great Redeemer. He must be removed as quickly as possible.”

“It’s not that simple,” Henry said. “He has hundreds of thousands of those puppets, and he’s turned the whole zone around him lifeless. It’s impossible to get close without alerting him. We have tried multiple times to gain intelligence, but our scouts get killed by swarming puppets who simply explode themselves.”

“Then I’ll simply head straight in,” Zac said. “There must be a limit to his power. There is no way he can control hundreds of thousands at the same time. We already saw he couldn’t freely control a thousand in the hunt. We were able to destroy hundreds of them without the things reacting.”

“I agree,” Thea added from the side. “Killing Salvation should be a priority. He might even be able to open up a portal for the Great Redeemer.

He did possess a protective talisman containing a wisp of his soul. Who knows what else he has? Perhaps he simply hasn't gathered enough sacrifices to open the portal yet. "

In the end, it was decided they would attack Salvation soon after Zac had closed a few incursions and reached level 75. Thea would join as well if the undead armies stood down and returned to the incursion. If not, he would have to do things himself.

The meeting went on, and one point after another was decided, and after another four hours, Zac had a proper picture of how he would proceed the following weeks. There were some uncertainties, depending on things such as whether they could find the underworld and the response of the New World Government.

There were a lot of risks involved, especially to Zac himself. But if everything went according to plan, Earth would be free of any foreign invaders in less than two months. There was still the issue of the Dominators and the Great Redeemer, but they would have to take things one step at the time.

But just as he was about to call an end to the meeting, Zac realized something odd.

"Wait, what about the Church of Everlasting Dao?" Zac exclaimed. "They're not in the information packets."

"That's the oddest thing..." Henry muttered. "We simply can't find them."

"How is that possible?" Zac asked with suspicion. "They are possibly the strongest force apart from the undead. How is it possible that they haven't made any waves?"

"We are not sure what is going on either," an aide said as he started typing away at his laptop.

The next moment, a screen of a torched village appeared.

"Up until two months ago, we could regularly find the aftermath of their crusade. They have burned hundreds of towns to the ground, leaving no survivors. The crusaders were part of a completely mobile force that never went back to their incursion to resupply, and they had no pattern to their slaughter. In fact, we do not even know where their incursion is located," the aide said.

"But some time before the hunt, all their activities stopped. We still do not know the reason. Some even speculate that they have left," Henry said,

though he didn't seem too hopeful about that prospect. "What we have learned about those lunatics makes that unlikely, though. I fear they are planning something big."

Zac slowly nodded, but Alea didn't seem as convinced. She touched her pouch, and the next moment, a piece of Springroot was thrown to everyone in the room.

"Eat up," Alea said. "If not, you'll be fed something far less appetizing."

Zac frowned at her manner, but he did agree with the sentiment. He felt it was a bit odd that the Marshalls never tested them once, and he hadn't seen anyone else using Springroot either since arriving. Had the Marshall Clan been infiltrated?

The tension in the room rose to an entirely new level as the two sides looked at each other in silence, and energies were swirling in the air. Finally, Thea shrugged and ate the piece of the root, and the moment she backed down, so did the rest. Even Henry bit down on the root after a bit, though his facial expression wasn't great.

"Happy now, miss?" he said as he turned a stern glare at Alea, who only smiled sweetly in return.

Zac felt it was lucky that no one had mentioned she was a poison user. If they knew that, then the situation might have gone out of control. However, it was as though Ogras were whispering in his ear that the Marshalls weren't necessarily innocent just because they ate the Springroot. They might still work with the Church.

In the end, Zac could only make a mental note of trying to gather intelligence on his own. His network wasn't anything special, but it was at least better than before the hunt. Since they were done with everything, Zac exited the meeting room with great relief. Having spent most of the day in the stuffy meeting room, he went out in the garden to enjoy a breath of fresh air.

"Sorry," a slightly helpless voice said from the side a few minutes later.

Zac looked over and saw Thea walk over and sit down next to him on the bench.

"For what?" Zac asked with some confusion.

"It feels like we're taking advantage of you. You're the one who will be risking your life over and over, while we have a much easier job. One could even say we are using the Zombie hordes as an opportunity to power-level our people," Thea said. "But I honestly can't find any better ways to do it. Only you can destroy the incursions with relative ease at the moment. Your

actions against that golem incursion made that extremely clear.”

“Well, that’s how things are,” Zac said with a shrug.

“It just pisses me off,” Thea muttered. “No one has done more for Earth than you, yet people are talking behind your back all over the world. Even some people in Westfort believe the nonsense the government is spreading.”

“It’s that bad?” Zac said with a grimace.

“Well... Never mind,” Thea said after a bit. “You know, the reason that Grandpa wants me to become famous on the battlefield is not to compete with you. It’s the opposite.”

“How so?” Zac asked with a skeptical look.

“We decided to reorganize after the hunt. The Marshall Clan will mainly focus on business in the future, and we are looking into the means of getting hold of a Mercantile License,” she said. “But we need some renown first. We’re an old family, but we have always been low-key, so very few know about us. This war is also meant to showcase our wares and set up a foundation.”

“That’s why you refused to give Calrin a monopoly,” Zac realized, getting a nod in confirmation. “Why are you doing this?”

“Because of you, of course,” Thea said with a shake of her head. “You are so far ahead of everyone else that it would be foolish to become a competitor in creating the World Capital. The New World Government still doesn’t understand your power, but I do.”

Zac was unsure how he felt about having forced them to reorganize like this. Would there be resentment in the future?

“Don’t worry about it,” Thea said. “We were businessmen from the beginning. It was only due to the integration Grandpa saw an opportunity to become something greater. But I think this is for the best. It makes my life easier at least.”

“I can tell Calrin to stop his expansion in Westfort if you want,” Zac offered.

“There’s no need. From what we understand, we will not be able to get a license in the short run. It might even be good for us to see how a proper Multiverse consortium does business,” Thea explained.

“I am sorry to disturb.” Alea’s voice suddenly came from behind them, making the two turn around. “Nonet and Ibtet have returned.”

Zac nodded and got to his feet, but only after throwing the poison mistress a slightly suspicious look. Was she popping up when he and Thea

were alone on purpose? But he could glean nothing from her face, so he only shrugged his shoulders before turning to Thea.

“I’ll have to see what they found out,” Zac said.

“Have fun,” Thea said with a wave, clearly intent on staying outside to enjoy the sunset.

Zac breathed out in relief when he saw the two Zhix were in mostly good condition. Nonet had a decent-sized wound in their chest, but Zac had a feeling that was due to their peculiar manner of greetings.

“Did everything go well?” Zac asked when he saw them.

“Hive Dahiti was luckily part of the traditional faction, allowing me to return alive,” Nonet said without any facial expression.

Zac’s eyes widened in alarm as he realized that he didn’t know whether the hive next to this place was part of the Dominators’ sphere of influence. He had simply assumed they were part of the normal Zhix since they had come to a cease-fire with the Marshall Clan.

“Your meeting with Herat in the hunt was known by Hive Dahiti. Herat is a highly regarded warrior, and their word has some weight with the council. They asked me to relay the message that they are ready to join you in battle, though we should do so soon,” Nonet continued.

“Is something happening?” Zac asked.

“We are losing hives to the Dominators at a steady pace,” Nonet said. “All pretenses have been dropped by now, and we are at war. Dozens of hives have been eradicated in the last weeks. Just as many have chosen to join them.”

Zac nodded with weariness.

“I plan on fighting it out with them as soon as the incursions are dealt with,” Zac said, explaining the current situation to Nonet.

The large Zhix mulled over the information for a bit until they spoke up again.

“I believe I will need to visit Hive Dahiti once more,” Nonet said. “I heard of the undead from Ibtap and my warriors. They are true abominations. It will also sharpen our blades for the holy war. The Zhix legions will want to join in this battle.”

ROT

Zac was delighted to hear Nonet's proclamation. The Zhix were born warriors, and they would be a great help against the endless Zombie hordes. The Zombies were a huge problem for forces like Zac's. His soldiers were a lot stronger than the Zombies, but there were simply too many of the undead.

"Did you mention the peace with the Marshall Clan?" Zac asked.

"The humans of this hive have proven to be decently strong warriors, and Hive Dahiti is amenable to an alliance." Nonet nodded.

"Then you can stay behind here. Bring someone from the Marshall Clan with you to the hive next time. The Marshalls know a lot more about the movements of the undead armies, and they can provide good input," Zac said.

With that, it seemed everything was dealt with. The only thing left to do was to prepare for war. Zac also wanted to experiment with his latest gains until they needed to mobilize, so he went to find the others.

Calrin was ready to go, as he needed to prepare the business expansion from his end. The Thayer family was already stretching itself a bit thin at the moment, opening over ten branches in just a week. But he was still energized by the thought of the increased revenue streams.

Adran would stay behind for a bit to coordinate the war effort, which only left Emily. After asking around a bit, he finally found the teenager with Billy in a lounge area. The two were in the middle of a battle in a fighting game, with around ten children excitedly cheering them on.

"Billy has missed video games!" the giant said as he desperately mashed the buttons of his controller when he saw Zac enter the room.

Zac could only shake his head when he noted the five controllers next to Billy that were all crushed into scrap.

“We have both video games and movies at Port Atwood,” Zac said. “We will start to battle the other ratlights in three days. Do you want to help?”

“Billy will come. Billy already misses the ratlight. Gave Billy a lot of money,” the large man excitedly said, accidentally destroying yet another controller.

A maid hurriedly swapped it out with a new one that she handed Billy without an expression.

“Thea’s family’s controllers are pretty weak,” Billy muttered. “Billy’s old controllers almost never broke.”

Since everything was dealt with, they started to gather their things as they headed toward the courtyard, where a car was waiting. By this time, Thea had come over, while Henry and Adran were still in the middle of a meeting. Zac felt a bit reluctant, as he had hoped he would be able to hang around a bit longer. But there was simply too much to do.

“Stay safe,” Thea simply said as Zac opened the door.

“You too. I’ll hopefully see you in a bit,” Zac answered with a smile as he entered the car.

The return was pretty uneventful, and Zac stepped out of the teleporter with the others just twenty minutes later. Calrin left to resume their tasks, and Billy wanted to see the town, so he went with him. The giant had become exceptionally excited to hear there were hundreds of Sky Gnomes at the Thayer Consortium and wanted to check it out. Only Emily and Alea remained, and after some hesitation, Emily said she was going to the Academy to train.

“Wait,” Zac suddenly said as he took out the painting he’d bought with credits from Yrial.

“Wha-What is this? Is this your hobby now? No wonder you didn’t make a move on Thea,” Emily blurted out, a small blush spreading across her face as she gazed at Yrial’s portrait.

Zac flicked her forehead to bring her back to reality, and he started to wonder whether he was making the right move giving this thing away.

“Snap out of it,” Zac said. “This is a Dao Painting of Yrial, the Lord of Cycles.”

“WHAT? This guy is the Lord of Cycles? He’s too good-looking. He could even become a pop star in Korea,” she squealed. “That old statue is way uglier than the real thing.”

Zac froze for a bit as he realized that what Emily said was true. The statue

in the repository only looked androgynous, and it lacked the perfection of Yrial's face. Did the Celestial Artisan intentionally make Yrial uglier out of spite? He remembered that the statue of the real Brazla was extremely dashing. But he shook his head to refocus.

"Well, don't mind that," Zac said. "I got this from the Lord of Cycles since it can help one to improve Elemental Daos. I think it is especially effective for Daos related to Fire and Ice since they were the main paths the Lord of Cycles took. I don't walk that path, so it won't really help me, but I'm sure many in the Academy can benefit from it."

"So what do you want me to do with this thing?" she said, her eyes repeatedly heading over to the pristine face in the painting.

"Bring it to Alyn. It might help the students progress faster in getting Dao Seeds," Zac said.

"You know, my class is a bit related to the elements. You saw my burning axe. Perhaps I can keep it," Emily ventured.

"Stop." Zac sighed. "Just bring it to Alyn and let her decide what to do with it."

"Fine," Emily muttered and took it before heading over to the Academy.

That left Zac alone in the compound with Alea.

"Speak with Janos and Ilvere. Prepare the armies. Our enemies are weak Zombies, so bring as many as possible. Quantity seems more effective than quality against those things," Zac said. "And send someone to the monastery to see if they are okay or need assistance."

"It is about time we weed out the weaklings and those who only want benefits without providing anything in return," Alea said with a nod as she walked toward the exit.

"I much prefer your rugged face above that girly boy," Alea suddenly added with a final wink before she left, leaving an embarrassed Zac behind.

Zac shook his head as a wry smile spread across his face before he walked back toward the teleporter. He had to admit it was nice to at least have one person preferring him over the annoyingly handsome Yrial.

Since the operation was starting in only two days, Zac immediately headed over to Mystic Island. The small camp had long been replaced with a proper settlement. However, it was completely military in nature and mostly housed barracks and training grounds for the stronger students and warriors of the Academy.

A couple of human soldiers were walking back toward the barracks, all of

them sporting various degrees of wounds. But they were still full of vigor, meaning their gathering trip had likely been pretty successful. Zac's new robe was quite eye-catching, and he got a few questioning or even taunting glares from the soldiers. However, those people were quickly dragged away by horrified comrades who recognized who he was.

He didn't mind such a thing happening. He already knew that Alyn was trying to foster a competitive and slightly ruthless environment for the Academy. As long as it didn't cause problems, he didn't mind. They would all be tempered in the upcoming war. Standing face-to-face with millions of Zombies would test anyone's mettle.

Zac immediately headed to the core of the island, and he noted that the beasts had improved quite a bit since he'd visited the last time. He sensed multiple auras belonging to beasts at the E-grade, though none of the auras were as strong as that of the tiger.

To gain the last levels before the assault would be impossible, so Zac instead focused his efforts on consolidating his latest gains. He would have preferred a bit stronger enemies to push himself against, but there were simply none around.

He spent the next hour testing the Seed of Rot with his various attacks, and he was quite satisfied with the result. As he expected, the blade didn't get stronger, but the attacks did gain an interesting effect.

It only took a second after wounding a beast before the wound started to look extremely infected, turning swollen and leaking pus. The animals were also noticeably weakened by the strikes, and with enough wounds they became so weak that they couldn't even move. When it got to that stage, the animals would die not much later, their carcasses completely rotted out.

This Dao was only effective when drawing blood, though. He had no problems imbuing his hand with the Dao of Rot, but a punch didn't cause the debilitating effect on the beasts. It did show some effectiveness if he hit a bleeding wound, but still not to the same degree as when imbuing his weapon.

The robes also proved to be extremely good and provided far better protection compared to the golden robes he'd taken from Tyrbat. They even had a passive shield that continuously lessened the force of any incoming attack, though there was a limit to its effect.

It was as though there were an orb of water around him, and any attack would first have to rip through that invisible sphere. But as the defensive

sphere weakened the attack, so did the defensive option weaken. After a while, the passive shield would completely run out, at which point it needed to absorb energy from the atmosphere for a few minutes.

There was also a stronger active shield like the old ones, though only one charge. Finally, there was another skill, though Zac wasn't able to activate it at the moment. It was a fractal that was engraved right over his heart, but it was completely dim just like most of the fractals on **[Verun's Bite]**.

The robe was the second Spirit Tool he possessed for personal use, and there was one slightly confusing difference between the two. He had tried to make contact with whatever Tool Spirit was housed inside the robes, but he could only sense an indistinct consciousness inside. It was like a breeze touched his consciousness, without intellect or personality.

He didn't understand why there was such a difference between the two items. The only thing he could think of was the mysterious rock from the auction that he'd fed Verun. It was only after he got that item that Verun started appearing in battle.

It only took another hour for him to get used to the improved power of his other Daos, leaving him ample time to work on **[Cyclic Strike]** again. But the results weren't promising.

If it weren't for his new gear keeping the beasts at bay, he would have looked like a beggar after a while. He had long lost count of how many times beasts had slammed into him or tried to tear him apart with their sharp claws.

He hadn't even been able to activate the skill in a controlled environment earlier, and it had proven even harder in the middle of battle. The problem was still primarily that he needed to split his attention in two and infuse each fractal with the same amount of mental energy.

He only managed to maintain the balance when he infused small trickles of energy into the fractals, but that was no good. It would take minutes to activate the skill in this manner, and the moment a beast attacked him, he lost concentration and the skill fizzled. He tried infusing the two fractals one at a time, but that simply didn't work either.

Zac even swapped over to his Draugr form to test whether he had an easier time using the skill there. But he quickly discovered that his Draugr constitution did not afford him any better control over manipulating the Daos.

Perhaps this was the way that his lack of aptitude took form. He might not have a very hard time learning to utilize the Dao, but his control wasn't very smooth instead.

Since he was already in his undead form, he tried his new shield for a bit as well. It performed above expectations, and the beasts below E-grade did not even manage to leave a scratch on it. The spikes were extremely sturdy as well, and Zac found it particularly effective to imbue them with the Dao of Rot.

One shield slam would gore a deep wound into the animal, and with the Dao Seed, a festering wound would be left behind, quickly weakening the target. The active attack also performed quite well, and while it couldn't kill an E-grade beast, it helped set up a kill with his axe. If he only got **[Cyclic Strike]** to work as well, he would gain quite a bit of lethality with his Undead Bulwark skill.

But he had remembered something in the excitement of the latest gains from the inheritance. He possessed another offensive skill to bolster his undead form.

It was **[Unholy Strike]**, the skill that he'd found among Mhal's belongings.

LITTLE BAU

Zac quickly taught himself the skill, and a fractal was formed above his navel. It only took him a few seconds to realize how it worked since it was exceedingly simple. He only needed to push Miasma into the fractal, and the fractal would in turn push concentrated power into the limbs of his choice.

Zac tried pushing Miasma into the arm that was holding his axe, and he quickly felt the strength in his limb increase. There was no discomfort whatsoever either, so Zac kept pushing more and more energy through the fractal. In the beginning, the arm simply felt pumped up like he was in the middle of a workout, but soon it started to grow.

By the time he started to feel some pain in his arm, the circumference of his bicep had almost doubled, and it radiated extreme power. Zac remembered the strength the Corpse Lord had emitted when he used this skill, and that was nowhere near the monstrous energy that was stored in his own arm at the moment. It was likely either his extremely durable constitution or his high Endurance that allowed him to push far more Miasma into his attacks than was the norm.

He had lost some of the arm's dexterity due to the new bulk, but it felt as though he could punch a hole in the sky. He quickly found a small hill and slammed the axe down with ferocious force, and the explosion almost matched the power of **[Nature's Punishment]**.

The hill was completely gone after the swing, replaced by a huge scar in the ground that reached almost a hundred meters in the distance.

The skill worked even above expectations, and it was almost perfect for the upcoming battles. It didn't provide great utility for fighting against hordes of enemies, but that also wasn't his job in this war. His enemies would be the

incursion leaders, and he had a feeling that very few of them would be able to walk away from a swing empowered by **[Unholy Strike]**.

Zac was forced to give up on **[Cyclic Strike]** for the moment, but he was still satisfied with the results of his experiments. He decisively headed back to Port Atwood after returning to his human form and walked toward the Academy. Perhaps Alyn knew of some method to improve the control of his Daos.

But who would have known that when he walked through the gates to the Atwood Institute, he would be met by pandemonium? A few hundred people had gathered in front of a large structure Zac didn't recognize, scuffling to get inside.

It was an all-out brawl, though luckily, no one used Cosmic Energy or skills. It wasn't only students either, as Zac spotted a few Valkyries and demons in the mix. They were the closest to the doors and were ferociously attacking each other to be the ones to step inside.

A few people sat some distance from the angry mob, nursing their wounds while glaring at the people still struggling to enter. They were likely the first casualties of the kerfuffle. Zac only gaped at the mayhem, wondering what was happening inside that made people so desperate to enter.

Suddenly, he spotted a familiar form speeding toward him. It was Alyn, and Zac froze when he saw her facial expression.

"Are you trying to tear my poor school to the ground?" the irate school mistress asked in an accusatory tone as she stopped just in front of him.

It was the first time Zac could see annoyance on Alyn's face, and something about her expression made Zac's hair stand on end. She was usually the personification of grace, but Zac was once again reminded that she was meant to be a slave driver rather than an educator on Earth due to her ruthlessness.

"What's going on?" Zac hesitantly asked as he secretly imbued himself with the Dao of Hardness just in case.

"Between the call to war and the magical painting, things have gone out of control," Alyn said as she took out a few familiar balls and threw them at the congested areas. "You really planned this one out exquisitely, didn't you?"

Explosions erupted one by one, and dozens of people were blasted into the air by each of the bombs. Only the Valkyries and the demon guards fared a bit better from the bombardment, but Alyn only snorted and took out a

handful of them and threw them all over at the same time.

A cascade of explosions finally put an end to the melee in the Academy, with Alyn single-handedly destroying everyone's fighting spirit. Zac could only wryly shake his head at her antics, and breathe in relief that the buildings seemed to be reinforced by arrays.

"Can you tell me what's going on now?" Zac said, deciding not to comment on the fact that Alyn had maimed the people who would soon be on the battlefield.

He knew that she was a master at using those small energy bombs, and while it looked random, no one was seriously hurt. They would be fine after taking a healing pill and resting for a day.

"It was that painting you had Emily bring," Alyn said with a shake of her head. "I couldn't see what was so special about it, so I simply placed it in the public meditation room since you said it would improve one's Dao comprehension."

"Two elemental mages sat down in front of it, and it took them just a few minutes to gain their first Dao Seeds. The news quickly spread like wildfire, and people are doing anything to get a chance to meditate in front of it before they are sent to the front lines," Alyn continued, some wonder creeping into her eyes.

"What? The painting was that effective?" Zac said with some shock.

He was just as confused as Alyn. He had looked it over when he got it, but he sensed nothing special from it. It was an exquisite painting, but that was about it.

"I believe that some special energy was left behind by the painter or the previous owner that helped the first couple of people to attain the seed. After a while, most of the effects wore off," Alyn explained. "It is still far more effective to meditate in front of it compared to without it. You know how much getting a Dao Seed improves one's combat power." Alyn sighed as she kicked a few students who didn't get up fast enough after getting blasted as they walked toward the meditation building. "I will place it in a restricted chamber instead, and one will only be able to meditate in front of it in exchange for contribution points."

"Well, I'm glad it is coming to some use at least," Zac said with a smile. "I am here for something else, though."

He proceeded to explain his problem with **[Cyclic Strike]**, though he didn't mention his horrible affinity.

“There are trinkets that can help train one’s spirit,” Alyn said after a bit. “I don’t have any, but they should be pretty simple for Calrin to purchase. They are slightly expensive, but that shouldn’t be a problem for you by this point. Now go away. I have so much to do.”

Zac was afterward unceremoniously thrown out of the Academy, and he walked over to Calrin’s. Thirty minutes later, he left with a tool that could train one’s mental dexterity. It was almost like a toy, where one needed to utilize mental energy to activate the contraption in certain patterns, but the amount of energy and the direction were extremely strict.

It was just what Zac needed at the moment, and he kept trying to complete the little puzzle as he walked through the town. Finally, he gave up in frustration, and when he looked up, he found himself in front of the tavern.

“Our fearless leader.” Ryan smiled when Zac walked in and sat down in the same spot as last time.

There were a few people inside the bar, but it was uncharacteristically empty at the moment. A few people were sitting alone or in small groups, but they all hurriedly looked down into their drinks when Zac’s eyes landed on them.

“How are things here?” Zac asked as Ryan placed one of the homebrewed meads in front of him.

“It was pretty calm until your people declared that Port Atwood was going to go fight a sea of Zombies,” Ryan said with a wry smile. “You know, even I have been drafted?”

“You?” Zac said with surprise. “No offense, but what good are you in this war?”

“Thank you for the vote of confidence.” Ryan snorted. “But it turns out I got a pretty good class, Barkeep. I can instill the drinks I serve to give small bonuses to things such as energy restoration and Endurance.”

“A support class?” Zac exclaimed. “That’s pretty cool. Do you get experience from serving drinks?”

“I haven’t figured everything out yet, but currently, I get most of my experience from tending the bar. The better my business fares, the more energy for me. But perhaps I will get Cosmic Energy for helping in the war as well,” Ryan said. “And at least I will be far from the front lines.”

“Well, it’s good to have you on our team. Have you spoken with that Beast Master lately?” Zac asked.

“That poor girl?” Ryan laughed. “She comes in here every other day full

of scratch marks, drinking herself into oblivion while cursing your name. You're lucky she became a Beast Master rather than a Hex Master."

The two kept talking for a while longer until Zac decided to head back to his courtyard. He would be thrown into constant battle in the coming weeks and needed some quiet rest before war engulfed their whole planet.

"SHIT!" the sailor screamed as he almost jumped two meters straight up in the air.

A massive blue tentacle wiggled back and forth a bit behind him before it once again slunk down into the depths.

"Almost scared me to death," the man muttered as he looked down at the azure waters with some dread. "Mr. Trang, can't you do something about your... uh... friend?"

"Little Bau is just playing around a bit," the old fisherman answered with a big toothless grin.

Four more tentacles suddenly appeared as though in response to Sap Trang's comment, and they latched on to the large Creator Vessel. The ship immediately started to rock back and forth in an alarming manner. However, none of the sailors seemed alarmed after the initial surprise, and they went about their business as though the boat were pushing through still waters.

"Little Bau, that's enough or no treat for you." Sap Trang laughed as he walked over and slapped one of the tentacles lightly.

The tentacles quickly released the grip on the ship, but the next moment, an enormous head breached the waters, rising until two eyes as large as barn doors looked at the old Vietnamese man.

Sap Trang wasn't alarmed in the slightest, and he only laughed once more before throwing out a whole barghest carcass with a dotting smile. It splashed into the water, and the next second, it was gone, stuffed into a huge fanged maw beneath the surface.

"That's a good boy," Sap Trang said as a tentacle caressed him. "Are there any dangerous beasts in the area?"

Two more tentacles started to wave in the air, and the next moment, huge half-eaten shark was lifted above the surface. The shark was almost as large as the Creator Vessel, but it was shrunken and withered as though it had lost

all of its moisture.

Hundreds of puncture wounds were crisscrossed across its body, created from the vicious stingers that Little Bau had on a few of its tentacles. Sap still wasn't completely sure what sort of beast he had picked up and nursed back to health.

From its tentacles, one could think that it was an enormous octopus. But it was something else entirely. It had an enormous head with a large round maw, leading to a thick torso that seldom reached above the water.

It did share some features with an octopus. For example, it did not have scales, but instead, a rubbery skin that was almost impenetrable to bladed weapons. It also possessed no legs, with the torso instead ending in a dozen or so tentacles that were over twenty meters long.

Interestingly enough, it also had four special tentacles that grew out from the torso like arms, and those things possessed nasty stingers that could suck a huge beast dry in less than a minute. Odder still was that blood wasn't the only thing it sucked, but it even absorbed Cosmic Energy through the suckers.

It had been on its last breath when Sap Trang found it. It had arduously won a fight against an enormous crab, but it was barely hanging on. Sap had seen an opportunity and initiated a bond with the animal through his class.

Perhaps Little Bau had been unreconciled to die like that and accepted the connection, even though it was far stronger than Sap himself. From there, the old fisherman had poured hundreds of healing pills into its insatiable maw as he had sewed its wounds shut.

The mysterious animal had quickly healed thanks to Sap's ministrations, and afterward, it started to follow their vessel, much to the dismay of the other sailors. But they all had to admit one thing. Ever since Little Bau joined their crew, they never had to worry about what lurked in the depths.

Because whatever was foolish enough to get close to their ship soon ended up in the belly of the beast.

"Just my luck," the fisherman who had initially been spooked muttered under his breath. "I get placed on the goddamn ship with a pet kraken."

READY FOR WAR

A table was placed in the middle of Zac's courtyard, and six people were sitting around it. Apart from Ogras and his three generals, there were also Joanna and Alyn. This was a war council, but Zac still wanted Alyn's input since no one had a better grasp of the strength of his armies than her.

"So, Alea should already have filled you all in on the general plan," Zac said as he turned toward Alyn. "Are the armies ready to be deployed?"

"Honestly? Barely," Alyn said with some annoyance on her face. "A lot of those people are too soft. War is exactly what's needed to get a few of those people in shape. And if they die, we at least save on costs."

Zac frowned a bit at Alyn's callousness, but she was adamant.

"Months and months have passed, and some have never even risked their lives. Many of those who joined the army were people who had huddled in fear within walls on the various islands, and they were thirsting for power. But now that they are faced with real risks, many are balking, and we have even had to publicly execute a few people who tried to cause a disturbance," the schoolmistress continued. "There is a good core of over eight thousand men and women, though; they will all be able to put up a fight."

"What? Eight thousand?" Zac gaped.

"Only the elites are actually at the Academy by this point," Alyn said. "Many are on other islands, defending our various facilities. "In total, our armies have already passed fifteen thousand men, though we need to leave at least twenty percent to protect our interests and maintain order."

Zac was surprised that the army had grown to such proportions, but then again, new people were added to his kingdom every week due to the unceasing efforts of Mr. Trang and his fleet. By now, there were over twenty

ships in the armada, many of them high-grade vessels like the corvette he'd bought last time.

The best part was that they had been added to his naval forces without any cost to his personal fortune. Taxes from the consortium and the crystals from the mine were already providing Port Atwood with a hefty monthly income by this point, which made maintenance and expansion much smoother.

Still, eight thousand was nothing compared to a horde of tens of millions of Zombies. Even if they killed a hundred Zombies each, they would barely have scratched the surface.

“This will also prove an excellent opportunity for them. It is not easy to gain experience of large-scale battles, but this provides just that,” Ilvere added. “Many of our men are still quite low-leveled, but an ocean of Zombies will provide an opportunity for rapid improvement.”

“Well, it is settled, then. Ilvere will be in charge of Port Atwood's forces. Try to cooperate with our allies and the Sino-Indian alliance, but the safety of our people comes first,” Zac said.

“I understand,” Ilvere said.

Zac suddenly had an idea as he looked at Ilvere, who seemed a bit confused by the stare.

“Here, take this,” Zac said as he handed him a crystal.

“What's this? [**Cyclic Strike**]?” Ilvere said with some interest.

“It is a skill I received from the Lord of Cycles. It utilizes two opposite Daos to form a formidable attack. It is up to you whether you wish to learn it,” Zac said. “But if you do learn it, I would like to be updated on your progress in mastering it.”

Zac had realized that Ilvere was working toward gaining both the Dao Seeds of Heaviness and Lightness. Zac wasn't sure, but perhaps the attack would work for him as well, and if he did manage to master the skill, it might provide a shortcut for Zac to master it.

“So this skill is why you came by yesterday?” Alyn said with interest. “It is a very novel concept. Combining multiple Daos in one strike at F-grade is quite uncommon. It is usually something that only those with great talent manages to accomplish.”

“Thank you, I'll learn it. I am aiming to fuse the two into the Dao Fragment of Momentum, and this skill might help me toward that end,” Ilvere said with some glee on his face. “If I learn something, I will update

you.”

“Great,” Zac said with a nod. “Next subject. The strike force. Who apart from Ogras should take part?”

“I guess I cannot opt out?” Ogras said with a grimace as he looked through the stack containing the information on the seventeen incursions remaining on Earth. “Some of these forces are pretty dangerous.”

“You ate my food; now you need to work for it a bit,” Zac said. “So, who else?”

“We have mastered the War Arrays for up to eighteen people,” Joanna said, speaking up for the first time in the meeting. “Truth be told, we won’t be able to increase your strength by a large degree, but we will be able to form a shield that covers our small squad. With such a small area of protection, the shield will be extremely sturdy.”

Zac nodded, feeling it was a good idea. Having that small squad with him would help protect Billy from harm.

“That sounds like a plan. Your main goal should be to guard Billy from surprise attacks. He is very strong, but his defenses aren’t the best,” Zac said.

“I will put together a team of our strongest people.” Joanna nodded in affirmation.

“You should bring the feral child as well,” Alyn suddenly added.

“Who? Emily?” Zac exclaimed. “Absolutely not.”

“She is only level 31, but her attributes are a match to many of the Valkyries,” Alea added. “Besides, she is a support class.”

“I am not sure I need the boost against the incursions,” Zac hesitantly said. “It’s not worth risking her life for that.”

“It’s not only about that,” Alyn said. “Support classes gain Cosmic Energy by simply empowering their allies. As long as you kill someone under the effect of her axes, she will gain a part of the experience. Her levels would skyrocket if she came with you. And she could stay within the shield created by the spear maidens.”

“Honestly, if you don’t bring her, she will get herself in trouble somewhere else,” Ogras said. “She has turned almost crazy in her pursuit of power during the last days. She said she needs to go to the underworld. Better keep her in sight where we can protect her. And you’re rich enough to deck her in enough defensive treasures to almost guarantee her life.”

Zac sighed when he heard about the teenager’s situation. She was probably extremely anxious to scour the underworld for her siblings. It was

the last chance for her to find any of her old family alive.

“Fine, but keep her away from the fighting. I want her at maximum distance from me so people don’t figure out she’s a support,” Zac relented.

“Anything else before we head out?” Zac said as he looked around the table. “Communication might be impossible for a while.”

“There is the issue of the evolutions,” Ogras suddenly said.

“The what?” Zac asked with confusion.

“Between the Origin Dao and the ample resources provided by Port Atwood, there are a decent number of demonkin warriors who are able to evolve by this point,” Ogras said.

“So what’s the problem?” Zac asked.

“Most are still only able to gain a Common class and are afraid we will force them to upgrade before the wars. They want to hold off on upgrading in favor of improving further before upgrading. As for the few who are able to gain an Uncommon class, they are afraid to evolve because of us,” Ogras said.

“Us? Why?” Zac asked with confusion.

“None of the leadership are E-grade yet. Evolving at this stage might be seen as a power play,” Ogras explained. “It’s extremely uncommon for anyone apart from the core group to hold the highest levels in a force.”

“Well, our situation is a bit special,” Zac said with a shrug. “Have as many as possible evolve into Uncommon classes; we need all the help we can get. Will they be able to evolve before we head out tomorrow?”

“It’s only Uncommon classes; the tribulation they have to endure is nothing much,” Ogras said with a nod. “They can join us.”

“Good, I want a small elite squad to mainly support the Valkyries and contain the battle,” Zac said. “And let those who can’t evolve to a decent class wait. Having them evolve into a useless class won’t really strengthen us enough for it to make a difference.”

“Agreed,” Ogras said. “I’ll handle it.”

“Great. There is one more thing that those who participate in the fight need to do as well,” Zac suddenly said. “They all need to enter a contract with me. One that will last indefinitely. In return, they will get a monthly stipend.”

“What?” Exclamations echoed across the table, with only Ogras seeming to understand what was going on.

“You should all understand that my power does not only come from my

levels. The details of a few of my lucky encounters will be exposed during the battles, but they can absolutely not be spread. Therefore, I need to enact this protocol,” Zac explained. “The Valkyries are excluded since they are already contracted vassals of mine.”

It was a measure to protect the information about his second class and race. Zac either needed to do this or kill everyone who participated, and he was unwilling to do the latter.

“What about the big one?” Ogras said.

“I’ll talk with him about it,” Zac answered.

“Will you tell us what’s going on?” Alea asked, her eyes thinning in suspicion.

“No, it might only implicate you,” Zac said with a resolute shake of his head.

“What about witnesses?” Ogras said.

“We’ll handle it,” Zac answered, some ruthlessness appearing on his face.

Ogras nodded approvingly and didn’t prod any further.

“Anyone who spreads this will be executed, no matter who it is,” Ogras added without hesitation.

“Great. As for the final subject,” Zac said as he reached for the pile of intelligence in front of Ogras. “This is the first target.”

“Human incursion, Ez’Mahal Confederation?” Ogras muttered. “Never heard of them. Anyone else?”

Everyone shook their head as well, indicating that they had no idea who they were.

“I picked this faction because of their ruthlessness against the natives in their zone. There are reports of indiscriminate murder and torture,” Zac said with a frown. “I want these people gone from Earth first.”

After reading through the information dossier, there was obviously an extremely wide range of strategies employed by the invaders. Very few forces were like the Church of Everlasting Dao or the Undead Empire. Most simply conquered the area and turned their sphere of influence into slave colonies.

In some areas, humans were actually better off under the control of the invaders compared to life in general. There were structure and security, and the deaths from the unforgiving wildlife were far less common.

But the Ez’Mahal Confederation was not one of these forces. Zac had already heard about them during his first visit to New Washington, and since

then, it had only become worse. The small country they had set up might be the worst place on Earth apart from a scant few places like the Miasmic Zone and the Cradle of God. Killing them would not only free people living in horrible conditions but also create a lot of goodwill across the world.

“Low to Medium tier,” Ogras muttered as he read through the report again. “They haven’t shown any particularly strong traits. Obsessed with class systems, uses slaves like we use the barghest. A force like this is usually quite fragile. A good place to push your level forward.”

“I want to avoid killing slaves as much as possible. The real targets are their leaders,” Zac said. “In fact, that should be the goal for all our operations. I will target the leaders; Ogras will occupy the generals and assist the rest of you while the rest keep reinforcements at bay. Ideally, the battles should not last more than a few minutes.”

The group kept going over the details for a bit until Zac adjourned the meeting. Everyone hurriedly left to prepare themselves for the intense battles that they would be thrown into. Zac spent the night once again switching between trying to activate [**Cyclic Strike**] and activating the toy before sleeping in.

At 8 a.m., he woke up, ready for war.

THE EZ' MAHAL

The next day, a somber procession marched through Port Atwood. Thousands of men and women gripping weapons proceeded in an orderly fashion, everyone wearing a backpack. They were all heading toward the undead incursion, to stem the spread of death. Some couldn't help fear from creeping onto their faces, whereas many glowed with anticipation. The civilians of Port Atwood silently looked on at the procession, knowing that the final battle for Earth was about to begin.

Meanwhile, a far less conspicuous group silently gathered within the inner walls, less than fifty warriors. But each one emitted power far beyond that of the general soldiers of the town. It was the strike squad that stood in front of Zac, and he surveyed them with Ogras by his side. He knew that he was supposed to say something at a juncture like this, but he didn't know what.

"Let's go. This is just the first battle of many, so remember to stay alive," Zac simply said as he turned toward the private teleporter.

It activated with a flash, and soon the small group of people had entered. The next moment, Zac and his people found themselves in a run-down warehouse. The shelves were empty, and dust was gathering in the corners. It was clear that this teleporter was not commonly used, but two armed men hurried over as soon as they arrived.

"Lord Atwood?" one of them asked, receiving a nod from Zac.

The man quickly pulled out a stack of papers from a bag, handing it over. It was a missive providing the latest intelligence of the incursion.

"We are currently one hundred kilometers away from the edge of the sphere of influence of the Ez'Mahal Confederation. They have been known

to sometimes roam even this far out in search of new slaves, so be careful. There have been no special movements the past few days,” the man quickly updated them. “Will you be needing anything from us?”

“Thank you,” Zac said. “It’s fine like this. We will be back in three days at the most.”

The squad streamed outside like specters of death and immediately set a high pace toward the incursion. The climate of the area was temperate, with leafy trees that had already shed their leaves. Winter was coming to large parts of Pangea, and not all the areas were spared from the cold like Port Atwood.

They had no special plan, only to push straight toward the heart of the incursion, killing any resistance that might crop up. It wasn’t that Zac took the situation lightly, but rather that there simply was too little information to go by. The Marshall Clan had set up an extensive network around the incursions, but they were unable to gather any detailed intelligence from the core.

This was another reason that Zac chose this one. From all accounts, this incursion seemed less organized than the usual, making it a good target for a first run. They would be able to improve their teamwork and planning as they kept going.

It didn’t take long for them to enter the area that the human invaders had claimed for themselves, but as the hours passed, Zac started to frown.

“Where are all the people? The report said that these people didn’t kill everyone?” Zac asked Ogras, who was running by his side.

They hadn’t entered any of the towns they passed, but they had sent a scout inside for intelligence. However, every single town they had passed was completely deserted and seemed to have been so for months.

“They have likely moved the population to large slave colonies, to save on resources. The beast problem will only get worse before it gets better, and it would waste too much manpower to guard all these small towns,” Ogras ventured with a shrug.

The demons were not too worried about the plight of the enslaved humans since they came from a society where slavery was quite common as well. Zac knew he couldn’t change anyone’s opinion on the matter, so he only kept running.

However, even the expressions of the demons started to change as they approached the core of the area controlled by the Ez’Mahal. They were

proceeding along the main path toward the main settlement, and the path suddenly had an extremely disturbing change. The roadside was littered with corpses, an endless number of them. Some were impaled on large poles while others had been hung from trees along the road.

One thing that seemed to unite all of the poor people was that they had been alive when they were hung, judging by their expressions and poses. All of them had undergone inhumane torture before being left to die.

“Animals,” Joanna growled as she placed a hand on a pale-faced Emily, while the others seethed as well.

Even the usually bloodthirsty demons looked at the morbid scene with disgust, and Billy had lost his usual joviality as he looked around with red eyes.

“Who did this?” the giant said with building fury.

“The guys we are about to attack,” Zac said with a grim face. “The Ez’Mahal Confederation.”

Billy silently repeated the name as he kept looking at the trees, but suddenly, a sound echoed from the distance as they saw a car approaching along the lonely road. It was a Jeep that had undergone some alterations to increase its sturdiness, and a large familiar insignia could be seen on the hood. It was the very same one in the intelligence report, meaning the car belonged to the incursion.

“It’s them,” Zac said, preparing to capture one of them as the car stopped fifty meters away from them.

But Billy was one step faster as he pushed away from the ground with a roar, closing the distance in one herculean leap. His enormous club was already in his hand, rumbling like thunder as it fell straight toward the car. A few people hurriedly tried to create some distance from the car, but most barely had time to open the door before the club smashed into the roof with a thunderous explosion.

The tremendous attack flattened the car and most of its occupants in an instant. Only two men managed to escape in time, but Ogras was already on the move. One of them was immediately impaled by dozens of spears and thrown onto a branch, joining the other victims along the road. The other man was soon in Ogras’ grip and forcefully dragged back toward Zac and the others.

“Who are you? Attacking the Ez’Mahal will result in your forces being annihilated,” the man said with some remaining bluster. “Your men will

become war slaves and your women whores!”

Zac didn't bother responding to the man and simply motioned for Ogras to extract information.

“Look away,” Ogras said to Emily, but she staunchly shook her head as she glared at the man in front of them.

Ogras simply shrugged, and the next moment, a shadow blade cut one of the man's legs clean off, making the man scream his lungs out. One of the demons in the group stepped forward, conjuring a fireball, and pressed it against the wound to stem the bleeding.

“Now, answer our questions and you will get a quick death. Otherwise, we will keep chopping and cauterizing until you are more cooperative,” Ogras said with an unhurried voice.

The man frenziedly nodded that he would comply, his bluster completely gone in an instant. It turned out that the people hanging from the sides were slaves who had caused displeasure to the invaders. That could mean anything from not working hard enough or simply making eye contact; there was truly no rhyme or reason to it.

Normally, the Ez'Mahal Confederation wasn't this brutal. Slaves were a commodity, after all, and this was a waste of money. But the leader of the invasion was someone called Thanso, a scion of some large aristocratic family in the confederation.

He was extremely cruel and didn't care about the well-being of the natives in the slightest since he didn't care about the resources that the slaves could harvest. Instead, he turned the area into a twisted hellscape where his closest circle could do any depraved thing they wished while he mainly focused on the Dao.

However, most people were still alive thanks to an early discovery by the Ez'Mahal. A very large area with Spiritual Soil had been found close to the Nexus Hub, turning the area extremely suitable for the cultivation of certain in-demand herbs. The slaves were mainly used as a workforce to clear farmland and work the farms. But they were also used to stave off the beast hordes who were attracted by the large fields of Spirit Herbs.

Ogras kept asking about specifics in the defenses of the incursion, and any other information that was lacking in the intelligence report. There were no particularly strong forces in the area, meaning that the incursion hadn't really been tested so far. That was likely due to a stroke of brilliance by the generals of the incursions.

A large number of strike squads containing humans from the Ez'Mahal Empire infiltrated all the promising forces in the area right before the Tutorial ended, and assassinated a lot of cultivators the moment they returned. That caused the collapse of most of the towns in the vicinity, making for easy pickings to restock on slaves.

The core of the incursion was a newly erected town called Grand Escape. It was an allusion to the fact that the Ez'Mahal nobles did not consider the invasion a life-and-death struggle, but rather a retreat where they could play around and gain some benefits before going home. However, that would all change soon.

There was a defensive array that seemed decently strong, and apart from that, there was an identification array similar to the one in Westfort. A tag was needed to pass through the gates without causing an alarm. Everyone from the Ez'Mahal Empire possessed one, and it seemed that the main function of the array was to stop slaves from escaping rather than protect from infiltrators.

Ogras took the tag from the captive and, after throwing a glance at Zac, slit the man's throat, making him bleed out in seconds.

"We can't use this," Ogras said as he observed the tag. "It seems to have been connected to his life force. If we walked through the gates wearing this, we would no doubt be caught."

"So we can only brute-force it?" Zac asked, not sparing the dead man another glance.

"No, I doubt that they went so far as to have a system that checks every single person's individual aura," Ogras mused. "I think that we can use these tokens if we keep the original owners alive. If that fails as well, then we can only go straight in."

"Okay, we'll find another squad," Zac said. "Billy, don't smash the next one."

The group set out again, and soon they were only thirty minutes away from the Grand Escape. Traffic was a lot higher here, with both cars and cultivators riding some horselike beasts passing the streets every other minute. The group had already gone into the woods to avoid being spotted, and they captured five groups passing by in quick succession.

They were stripped of their clothes and weapons before Ogras and a few demons took them away. Zac threw a confused glance at him when he returned with a dense aura of blood around him.

“They will live for an hour, perhaps two. Though they would probably wish it would be over much quicker,” the demon said with a nefarious smile, and Zac didn’t care enough to ask anything further.

Soon they were all dressed in gear from the captured squads, though they were forced to make some improvised modifications for Billy and the demons. Hopefully, no one would look too carefully at the people inside the stolen vehicles.

“If we get through the gates, that’s for the best,” Zac said as he looked at the squad. “If not, we’ll head straight for the castle. Kill everyone in the way, but conserve energy. Emily, give me the Endurance boost, please.”

It wasn’t that he was worried about getting hurt, but the aura would also boost Emily. Letting her gain a part of his own monstrous Endurance would help her stay safe in the upcoming battle. Emily nodded, and a green axe appeared in her hand. She threw it into Zac. He felt a surge of power, and a quick check of his status screen showed that it worked just like the fire axe, except this one gave Endurance and Vitality.

“Wow,” Emily gasped as she looked with wide eyes at Zac, her own aura having suddenly increased by a large margin. “You’re like a tank.”

Zac shrugged with a smile, knowing she was surprised by the size of the boost she got. She had likely believed that Strength was his highest attribute after seeing how much she got from the flame axe.

“Girl, how much Endurance does he have?” Ogras said while poking Emily from the side.

“Not telling.” Emily grinned.

“Okay, that’s enough,” Zac said with a helpless shake of his head. “They’re going to notice a bunch of people have gone missing soon enough. Let’s head out.”

RAGE

Three cars and a military truck soon drove toward the gates of the Grand Escape, with the humans in the cars while the demons hid within the tarp of the truck, their heads cowed just in case.

Zac sat in the passenger seat while Joanna was driving. Ogras was the only demon not hidden away in the truck, and he sat in the back seat as well. Shadows had gathered around him, making his features indistinct without drawing attention to them.

“Who are you?” the guard captain said with a frown when he saw the odd procession.

“We bring news to His Excellency Thanso,” Joanna said without missing a beat. “The natives are amassing for an assault.”

The guard’s brows rose in surprise, but they soon furrowed again as he took a second look at Joanna and Zac, who calmly looked right ahead. But Zac was starting to get a bad feeling when no answer was forthcoming.

“A–” was all that escaped the guard’s mouth before he and the other four gatemens had their necks cracked by shadowy tendrils that somehow had reached the guards from the odd shadow appendage that usually stayed within Ogras’ metal casing.

Zac quickly looked around, and when he saw there was no traffic in the area, he pointed out two fingers from the window, and the next moment, a Valkyrie jumped out of the car behind. She rushed over to the dead guards, who were still held upright by Ogras’ shadows, and touched them for a few seconds each before running back to the car.

Zac nodded toward Joanna, and she sped off, leaving the corpses of the five guards frozen solid. They knew that little stunt wouldn’t buy a lot of

time, but a minute or two was all they needed. The town wasn't very big, and they already knew where they needed to go since Thanso was always holed up in his palace, mostly occupied with cultivating or torturing his poor slaves.

The convoy sped through the town at a breakneck pace, as it was only a matter of time before the corpses of the guards would be noticed. Interestingly enough, the hurry of their group seemed to lessen suspicion rather than the opposite. The people on the street seemed to be under the impression that they were hurrying along on official business and quickly got out of the way.

But even though they drove as fast as they could, Zac was able to see the type of town the invaders had built. The Grand Escape was a completely alien settlement, just like Azh'Rodum on his island, and all the architecture was foreign.

But the interesting design choices weren't what garnered Zac's attention. It was the copious number of slaves who hurried along the sides with their heads held down. Most were barely clothed even though winter was coming, and he couldn't spot anyone without a fresh set of wounds.

It was easy to see the utter disdain the Ez'Mahal had for the native slaves, and they were treated worse than cattle. There were also a huge number of brothels, with chained girls listlessly standing in the windows, their eyes devoid of emotion.

A fire raged in Zac's chest, and he wanted to jump out of the car swinging. The Valkyries in the car looked even worse, and it was as though their fury would set the car on fire.

"They'll pay," Zac simply said as his eyes moved away from the road and toward the castle in the distance.

"What's our strategy?" Joanna said from the driver's seat.

"If the gate is open, drive straight through it. If it's closed, then I'll open it. Afterward, we kill every soldier we can see," Zac simply said, drawing quick nods from the others.

The town wasn't very large, and it took just a few minutes to drive straight through the main street to the palace.

"No array," the Valkyrie sitting next to Ogras noted as her eyes had a golden glow.

The Valkyries had proven more versatile than Alea had made it sound like, and the abilities they possessed were far more diverse than he expected. They did all have spear-related classes, but many possessed their own niche

abilities that rounded out the hundred-woman squad.

“Head right in,” Zac said with an emotionless voice, his axe already lying in his lap.

A few guards made to stop them, but they were ripped apart by shadows before they could even voice a complaint. The group of vehicles easily entered the large square in front of the palace and leisurely stopped in a line as everyone got out. Zac had already ripped apart the Ez’Mahal robe he had covered his real gear with, disgusted with even pretending to be part of this debased force.

A red blaring light suddenly exploded in the sky above the castle, and soldiers almost immediately flooded toward them from every direction. They were all wearing livery with two insignias: one for the Ez’Mahal Confederation, and one for whatever aristocratic family Thanso belonged to.

Zac breathed out in relief when he saw that it was only well-trained soldiers who had moved to intercept them. The intelligence packet mentioned that these people used human wave tactics, sending throngs of slaves to their deaths to tire out their enemies. But luckily, it looked like the innermost core of the incursion was guarded by elites instead, enabling Zac and the others to fight without any compunctions.

“Lay down your weapons immediately,” a guard captain shouted, but Zac simply hurled a large rock from his Cosmos Sack at him.

The captain was not bad, and a shield rose in front of him lightning quick. But the force of the rock was tremendous, and he was thrown backward ten meters, even though the rock disintegrated before it could harm him.

The guards stared with wide mouths at Zac, and the next moment, shields and other protections covered the wide array of soldiers. There were roughly eight hundred people in front of them, and more were joining every minute.

Worse yet was that all of them were very strong, and a few of the soldiers might even have reached E-grade, though barely.

“Attack,” Zac simply said as he started to throw out fractal blades.

It looked like the strongest people of the incursion still weren’t around, so Zac wanted to take the opportunity to thin out the numbers to lessen the pressure on his strike team. Not that he needed a reason since he was still completely infuriated after seeing the misery these people had brought upon Earth’s citizens.

Five blades imbued with the Dao quickly soared toward the defensive line, ready to cut the army to pieces.

“WHO DARES ATTACK LORD THANSO’S MANOR?” an enraged voice suffused with power echoed across the square, and a wiry man holding a spear jumped out from a window.

The man was clearly one of the stronger combatants of the force, and he even managed to destroy two of the fractal blades before they could wreak havoc on the army.

“I guess that’s my cue.” Ogras shrugged as shadows started to converge around him.

“You sure you can handle it?” Zac asked with some hesitation.

Ogras was pretty strong, but he was still only a Peak F-grade warrior. The other spear wielder had not just evolved, though, making Zac unsure whether Ogras could handle it.

“You forget, my restrictions are completely gone, while these guys seem to still be lacking 20 to 30% of their Strength. Besides, you should be able to feel that this guy is nothing special,” Ogras said as he disappeared.

Heavy thuds followed Ogras’ disappearance as Billy rumbled toward a thick clump of warriors. His eyes were almost completely red in rage, and he bellowed at the top of his lungs as he swung his club in a thundering horizontal swing.

A wave of destruction erupted from the club, and it was as though the air itself cracked and exploded. The energy wave moved quite quickly as it pushed across the square and hit the front lines of the soldiers. The first row of people was immediately turned to a bloody mess as they were flung high up in the air.

Even the following rows received gruesome wounds from the odd skill, many even dying. Between his huge frame and his devastating attack, Billy quickly became a target of the soldiers, and a storm of attacks sailed toward him almost immediately.

Billy’s eyes widened in alarm, but then a thick golden shield enveloped him, protecting him from the attacks falling like rain. It was the Valkyries, who worked together to form a defensive barrier, and since it only needed to protect one man, they were able to make it extremely sturdy.

The volume of attacks caused cracks continuously that allowed the occasional attack to slip through, but while Billy’s Endurance wasn’t the highest, it was high enough to shrug off errant attacks. Emboldened by the protection, he charged straight into the crumbling line of Ez’Mahal.

Furthermore, he wasn’t alone but closely followed by a group of

bloodthirsty demons rushing in his wake like a pack of wolves. Each of them was the cream of the crop among the demons, and they were also temporarily lent the best gear Port Atwood had to offer. The combination boosted their lethality to new heights as they entered a pitched battle with the soldiers who had already been forced to taste Billy's wrath.

They had all recently evolved, and they were extremely eager to start leveling again. Many of the demons had been stuck at the bottleneck for decades, and the possibility of finally moving forward again pumped their veins full of adrenaline. Besides, they desperately needed to rack up a mountain of contribution to get cultivation resources.

The E-grade brought far greater power, but the cost of progression also multiplied manifold. There was not only the issue of needing higher-graded crystals to cultivate, but the medicinal baths cost far more. They even needed to upgrade their gear, since their weapons and armor wouldn't be able to stand the increased Cosmic Energy for long.

Zac kept his distance while shooting out a constant stream of fractal blades to cull the numbers and prevent the soldiers from organizing. Since he didn't need to exert his full force, he decided to experiment with the Dao of Rot, imbuing all his attacks with it.

Another benefit of the corrosive Dao started to show itself after he had shot a handful of attacks into the soldiers. The blades usually only managed to kill ten or so before the soldiers managed to exhaust the attack, but the Dao of Rot left a lingering effect.

Pockets of decay started to form on the battlefield due to the compounding strikes, and even soldiers who were not directly wounded started to show signs of weakness and nausea. Zac was elated by the results, but he still kept his eyes peeled. The main reason he hadn't entered the thick of it was that he was still waiting for the leaders to make their move.

Suddenly, a spike of danger made Zac quickly erect his defenses. The next moment, an ocean of small needles tried to rip him apart. All of them were even smaller than a sewing needle, but they contained a massive amount of force.

The swirling leaves around him were ripped apart one by one, and Zac felt like he was standing in an ocean of irate wasps. But an effective Endurance of over 1,000 proved its worth at this point, preventing the needles from causing anything more than light flesh wounds.

But Zac was a bit helpless in this situation since he had to block his eyes

from being attacked. While his flesh was stronger than reinforced steel by this point, the same thing couldn't be said for his eyeballs, and he would likely go blind if one of the needles struck him. Out of better options, he activated the charge on his new robes, and the thousands of needles were immediately pushed back from a shield looking like a shimmering blue shell.

Zac quickly moved his fingers as he glared around, and soon spotted a suspicious person standing in an alley between two houses. He was far from the battle, and his eyes were trained right on Zac. But most importantly, he was decked in extremely gaudy clothes, completely ruining his attempt at hiding. Zac growled as he activated **[Loamwalker]**, and in an instant, he was in front of him.

The man looked shocked, and an amulet quickly burst into light, forming a protective barrier around him. Zac only sneered as his axe fell down three times in rapid succession, breaking open the turtle shell. The next moment, the richly decked man was grabbed by his throat. Alarm could be seen on his face as the swarm of needles returned to aid him.

But Zac simply used the man as a human shield, blocking the attempts to attack him once again. But he didn't properly stop struggling until Zac tightened the grip to the point that his neck almost broke.

"Unhand the Lord!" the wiry general shouted, but he was kept at bay by an ocean of shadow spears.

"If you harm me, your pitiful planet will be eradicated!" the youth wheezed out through his teeth. "You're just animals of lower bloodlines; know your place."

Zac looked in the eyes of the man for a second, confused where he got this confidence from. In the end, he could only chalk it up to this idiot being too pampered throughout his life.

"You think you could come here and treat us like cattle?" Zac said, his voice echoing out through the square.

"Think again."

The next moment, a fountain of blood spurted in all directions as Zac directly ripped off Thanso's head and slammed it down onto the ground.

PUNISHMENT

This was the weakest leader Zac had fought so far. He was clearly E-grade, but neither his attributes nor Dao enlightenment was anything special. The weapon he used was pretty amazing, though, likely a gift from his clan.

The soldiers looked on, aghast at the fate of their Lord, either worried about the incursion or the fate that awaited them when they returned. After seeing how easily Zac had handled one of the strongest men of the incursion, their battle spirit quickly waned, and many started to look around for means of escape.

“We surrender; we’ll leave your planet at once!” one of the generals immediately shouted, and the eyes of many soldiers turned toward a structure in the distance. “The wealth accumulated during our stay is all inside Lord Thanso’s Cosmos Sack!”

“We can’t let them!” Joanna spat from the side.

Zac touched the Cosmos Sack as he mulled over what to do. He remembered what he’d learned back in the library, and this wasn’t necessarily the last time they would encounter people from this confederation. He was still infuriated by how the Earthlings had been treated, but it would perhaps cause trouble down the line to act excessively.

There were no doubt a few who had already fled, making it impossible to keep the results of this battle on lockdown. But the moment he sensed what was inside the Cosmos Sack, his pupils turned to needlepoints, and his rage was completely rekindled. Any thought of a cease-fire was immediately thrown out the window.

Corpses. Hundreds of corpses, mutilated and abused. Most of them were young women, but there were men and even children there as well. Zac

looked down at the headless corpse of Thanso, infuriated that he'd died so easy. It took a special kind of monster to torture this many people, then keep their bodies as mementos.

“Leave no one alive,” Zac growled, and the next moment, he exploded into action.

Despair filled the eyes of the soldiers when they saw Zac's reaction, and they fled toward the Nexus Hub as fast as they could run. But how could it be that easy to escape an enraged Zac? Explosions of blood and gore erupted wherever warriors were clumped together as Zac arrived with **[Loamwalker]**, destroying everyone around with wide sweeping arcs of death.

The others needed little prodding either, and they unleashed all their strongest attacks on the collapsing defensive lines of the soldiers. Ogras had taken the opportunity to assassinate one of the generals who was caught off guard by Zac's wanton slaughter. That left only two more powerhouses on the side of Ez'Mahal, and Zac and Ogras each picked one. An all-out assault by Zac overwhelmed the mage; his defensive skills and treasure were whittled down in seconds.

Afterward, Zac simply shot out a handful of blades at the last general, who quickly lost his life from being pincerred. By this point, quite a few people were starting to stream in through the gates, and Zac was wondering if they were reinforcements. But when he saw their appearance, he realized that they likely had received some prompt and wanted to escape back home through the Nexus Hub.

The fires of fury were far from abated after seeing the bodies Thanso kept in his Cosmos Sack, and Zac's eyes turned toward the large cathedral-like building that the Ez'Mahal people ran toward. A huge tear in space opened as the enormous hand of **[Nature's Punishment]** emerged. Zac wasn't thinking straight as he flooded the hand with his Peak-grade Dao and Cosmic Energy.

The only thing on his mind was to completely destroy their last hope and punish the invaders. It almost looked like the hand was shrouded in green flames as it ripped through the air, quickly arriving at the teleportation hub. A dense aura radiated from it, its very existence having a restraining effect on the soldiers beneath it.

Suddenly, a fractal twenty meters across appeared above the hand as the fractal rings on the hands shone with blinding intensity. It was not something Zac had seen before, but when he laid his eyes on it, he felt as though he

breathed fresh air from a mountaintop and smelt wet soil. It was the embodiment of earth itself.

Most importantly, the aura kept intensifying, and everyone in the area was soon forced down on their knees, some even exploding due to the otherworldly pressure. It was as though the area in front of the building were being crushed by a mountain. However, that wasn't all. The fractal suddenly flew straight down toward the ground, passing right through the wooden hand.

The fractal caused a hundred-meter-wide indent to form around where it slammed down, and only those possessing decent defensive skills or treasures were still alive, albeit barely. The grand building that housed the Nexus Hub was barely standing. Its roof was caved in from the pressure, and one of its walls had completely collapsed. It looked like it wouldn't stay up for much longer unless it was reinforced.

Wails of pain and panic echoed across the area as the Ez'Mahal soldiers still alive found themselves in a pit full of bodies and debris. The fighting had largely died out amongst those who had chosen fight instead of flight, and even those of his own side looked at Zac with wide eyes. But only he knew that the attack was only halfway over.

The next moment, the wooden hand punched down with monstrous strength. The last remnants of the house were completely destroyed, and a second shockwave expanded as though a bomb had gone off in the epicenter. The screams of the few survivors from the fractal were drowned in the dust cloud of the explosion, and the whole area was covered in the haze.

Then there was just silence.

Zac took a few deep breaths as he looked at the destruction with hard eyes until they switched over to Ogras, who walked over.

"What about the rest?" Ogras said, not commenting on the wanton slaughter Zac had just committed. "We've gone this far; we might as well hunt them down."

"Quite a few people arrived here through the incursion; we won't be able to hunt them all down with our small squad." Zac sighed, the fires in his chest having slightly abated. "Let's focus on freeing the slaves. And kill anyone who looks like he can become a threat."

The demons nodded as he turned around. A sea of shadows suddenly emerged at the gate, and dozens of spears impaled the few people who hadn't already fled after seeing Zac's attack. Billy simply sat down when seeing the

battle was over, his lungs moving like bellows as he gulped for air. Tears were streaming down his face as he sat unmoving, and Zac walked over with a frown.

“Are you okay, Billy?” Zac asked as he sat down in front of him.

“Mama said to never hurt people,” Billy said. “But Mama never met people this bad. These people deserved it, but Billy is still sad.”

Zac sighed as he looked at the giant. He realized that Billy might not have ever killed humans before he joined this mission, as most of his time had been spent in the ratlight. The scene also made him wonder what kind of person he had become. He had killed close to a thousand people in just a few minutes. Yet he felt nothing, neither joy nor sadness nor shame. It was as though he had cut down a bunch of trees, eliciting no emotional reaction.

He patted the giant on his shoulder before he walked over to Emily and the squad of Valkyries who had protected her. They had stayed away from the thick of it, mostly providing support while keeping themselves safe.

“Are you guys okay?” Zac asked as he looked at the group.

“People are messed up,” Emily muttered before she looked up. “We need to become stronger, or we’ll become slaves as well when the world loses its protection.”

The Valkyries emphatically nodded, having all too much experience in that department. When people could attain the powers of gods, some truly started to treat normal humans as ants.

“We’ll sweep this place clean before we liberate the slaves in the town,” Zac said. “We’ll also bring over a few hundred of the reserves to take control while we head over to the plantations. I’ll watch over the remaining soldiers.”

The girls nodded, and soon the small strike squad went through every nook and cranny of the castle. Soon hundreds of slaves had been found, some in extremely horrible conditions. A few even chose to immediately end their lives the moment their shackles were removed.

Everyone was moved out to the square, standing some distance from the timid group of Ez’Mahal soldiers who had thrown down their weapons. They didn’t dare to move a muscle after Zac had told them to stay put before sitting down to restore his energy.

No one even so much as dared to breathe loudly when sensing the immense aura that Zac emitted. He was sitting in the middle of the square as both a deterrent for any foolish actions and also because he was simply a bit tired. The attack had cost far more than a normal **[Nature’s Punishment]**

had, and he curiously opened his menu as he waited for the others to finish their sweep.

[Nature's Punishment – Proficiency: High. Awaken the wrath of the world. Upgradeable.]

It had actually upgraded to High proficiency. Furthermore, Zac had a feeling that it had upgraded before he even used it. After reading the flavor text, he had a strong feeling that the upgrade was linked to his emotional response. He had been well and truly infuriated after seeing Thanso's bag, and that rage had fueled the skill.

Unfortunately, he also noticed that the battle hadn't been enough to reach level 75, even though he had killed two E-grade cultivators. He even felt that he wasn't all that close, meaning that the final level seemed to require far more energy than the earlier ones. Still, if there was one thing he wouldn't lack in the coming weeks, it was enemies, so he wasn't worried he wouldn't get there soon enough.

Eventually, Zac turned his eyes to the hundreds of ragged people who stood huddled in the square. Their eyes were all trained on him, some with hope, and others with fear. He retracted his aura as he stood up, gripping an E-grade Nexus Crystal in his hand. His sudden movement made the group instinctually shrink back, and some even tried to hide the few children behind their emaciated bodies.

"I am Zac Atwood," Zac said with a loud voice. "You might know me as Super Brother-Man from the ladder. We have killed all the leaders of the Ez'Mahal, and we will begin clearing out the area to kill every one of these scum. You all are free."

All the people stared blankly at him for a few seconds until a few broke down and started crying large tears of relief. Others simply fell down on their knees, holding their heads. A few even kneeled in front of him in thanks.

But suddenly, chaos erupted in the ranks of the former slaves as a young man around seventeen or eighteen jumped a middle-aged woman and ruthlessly started to punch her. Weirder yet was that not a single person tried to help her, instead opting to either look away or look on with schadenfreude.

"YOU FUCKER," he shouted and started to relentlessly punch and claw at the woman, seemingly intent on tearing her apart.

Zac frowned and flashed over before lifting the youth and tossing him

away with one hand.

“What are you doing?” Zac asked with a frown.

“That bitch sold so many girls out to those alien psychopaths. It’s because of her my sister was tortured to death,” he screamed, tears running down his cheeks.

“We all did what we had to do to survive!” she said, her eyes thick with fear as she glanced at Zac. “They would be found out soon anyway! They had eyes everywhere.”

A spear tip suddenly burst out through her chest, and she looked down at her engorged chest with confusion before her eyes turned vacant. Zac looked up at Joanna, who stood behind her with ruthless eyes.

“Question everyone; find the other conspirators,” Zac said, steeling his heart. “Purge everyone who betrayed Earth.”

His order quickly caused a few individuals to be isolated as they screamed and pled to be spared. But the Valkyries had long turned into ruthless killing machines, and the targets were quickly executed after the details were confirmed. Zac himself didn’t act, but he passively looked at the result of his order. But while his exterior was calm, the same couldn’t be said of his thoughts.

He felt he was walking down a dark path, the weight of his victims causing a heavier and heavier burden. Would he emerge with his soul intact, or would the sin of his actions consume him?

PLANTATIONS

Zac knew a lot of blood would be shed from his order, but he didn't want to leave cancerous individuals behind. Every force he liberated would also become part of his jurisdiction, and he could not leave such hidden risks in times of war.

Next, he purchased a teleporter, as the moment that he had killed Thanso and the last general, the town was considered his by the System. A Valkyrie immediately stepped through it to report back to Port Atwood and to relay his orders. Hundreds of reserve fighters would join the area soon enough to stabilize the situation and return some order to the chaos.

He internally winced at the cost of all these transportations, but he also knew that the value of the area far outweighed the cost. It became increasingly clear from reading the intelligence on the incursions that they were all placed close to some sort of natural resource.

The demon incursion not only got the Nexus Vein, but also the Tree of Ascension. It had already been confirmed that the mountains of the second incursion he'd closed were rich in valuable metals, and this place had the farmland with Spiritual Soil.

That farmland was also why Zac was a bit hurried. And after giving a few more commands to Joanna, he gathered Ogras, Emily, and half of the demons and Valkyries. The others would be led by Billy to keep things in check. All the strongest people had long been killed, so Billy would have no trouble keeping things in check as long as the remaining Valkyries shielded him.

The rest needed to go to the vast plantations and claim them before the Ez'Mahal people could ruin or plunder the fields in revenge. Winter was coming, but that didn't affect Spiritual Soil and Spirit Herbs, which could

grow year-round straight through the ice if need be.

“Who here has been to the plantations?” Zac asked as he looked at the slaves.

The bloody spectacle of Joanna had once again cowed the crowd, but soon a middle-aged man stepped forward.

“There are three large plantations, my Lord,” he said with a posh British accent. “I have been to all three. I have also heard chatter of a higher-grade garden, but I never learned where it was situated.”

Zac had the man enter the car they’d used to get inside before he entered as well. Just as they were about to drive out, they noticed people streaming out of the teleporter. The reserves clearly had been on standby since less than three minutes were needed for them to organize everything. Zac felt confident in leaving the town now when there were hundreds of his soldiers keeping things in order.

The car once again sped through the streets of the Grand Escape. It turned out the man whom Zac brought was called Henry, just like the Marshall patriarch. However, his history was quite different. He was a trained butler, and Thanso had thought it was novel to have a native servant to wait upon him.

He was one of the few people who had been treated somewhat decently of the slaves. Not through benevolence, though, but because Henry was very skilled, and Thanso did not want to waste time finding a new native butler.

More impressively, the reason that he seemed so popular amongst the slaves was that he had dared to lie straight to Thanso’s face, saving dozens of poor women who would have met grim fates otherwise. Of course, he had only been able to save a scant few of Thanso’s numerous victims, but Zac was still impressed with the guts of the man.

As they drove through the town, chaos was already taking hold. A lot of the people in the city were various noncombat classes supporting the invasion, and when the leaders and the soldiers fell, pandemonium soon erupted.

No matter where he looked, former slaves were rising up against their masters in an all-out brawl. Neither were very powerful, but the slaves didn’t seem to care about their lives as they mobbed the foreign invaders like a swarm of angry bees.

Zac didn’t have any means to help them out, but after throwing Ogras a look, shadow spears started emerging within a hundred meters of the cars. No

matter where one looked, Ez'Mahal natives were getting skewered, and by the time they left the town, hundreds had fallen to Ogras' attacks. Ogras had understood Zac's intent, though, and only attacked those who were killing natives.

They followed the directions of Henry as they sped down the roads, heading toward the closest plantation. According to the butler, around ten thousand slaves were working there. Zac couldn't understand how a plantation could need so much manpower, but when he understood why, he was livid.

The Ez'Mahal possessed an extremely sinister array to speed up the growth of the plants. A slave was needed to continuously infuse the array with energy, and the energy helped the herbs grow faster. But it didn't only sap the slaves of their energy, it also slowly sapped them of their life force.

They even had special cultivation manuals that were extremely efficient in restoring lost Cosmic Energy, but in turn were essentially useless in progressing in levels since it harmed one's foundations. They forced any slaves who were cultivators to swap to this manual and used them to feed the most precious herbs.

Not only did that help the Ez'Mahal to harvest the plants far quicker than usual, but it also prevented rebellion. The slaves were always so drained that they could barely stand, let alone fight in an insurrection.

The group drove for roughly thirty minutes on a newly constructed road until the forests gave way to an enormous field spanning god knows how large an area. They didn't even see it all due to some fields having plants reaching a few meters into the air, but it had to be at least dozens of football fields large.

"Is all this on Spiritual Soil?" Zac asked with wide eyes.

"I am not too knowledgeable about what Spiritual Soil is, but the actual area with the better soil is even larger than this," Henry said after thinking it over. "Deforestation has been ongoing since the integration to open up more farmland. But apparently, the soil is littered with solid rock, and they have been forced to move a mountain's worth of boulders to clear it."

As they entered the plantation, Zac soon noted mats placed through the fields, and on some of them, people were sitting, seemingly in meditation. But at other spots, people were aimlessly wandering with confusion and hesitation in their eyes.

They approached a large mansion that was almost in the middle of the

fields, and Zac's brows rose when he saw it was surrounded by people. They looked emaciated but spirited, holding everything from wooden clubs to large rocks in their hands.

Unfortunately, the car Zac and the others sat in was a stolen Ez'Mahal vehicle, and the moment they approached, they were pelted by rocks as the revolting slaves closed in on them. Henry's eyes widened in alarm, but Ogras only snorted as he stepped out.

The smarter slaves quickly stopped in their tracks when they saw the demon's appearance, but the most irate slaves didn't even register the set of horns on Ogras' head.

"Don't kill anyone," Zac said as he stepped out as well.

The next moment, the slaves had frozen in place, with everyone who still held a weapon in their hand having a shadow spear trained on their throat or heart. Resistance immediately crumbled in the face of overwhelming power, and the rebels quickly discarded their makeshift weaponry.

"We are not part of the Ez'Mahal. We are their enemies. Where are the leaders who ran this place?" Zac asked with a loud voice.

"They ran that way!" a woman shouted, pointing in the direction of the woods with anger. "They took everything they could carry as well. Treasures and herbs! We had no way to stop them or keep up with their speed."

"How long ago?" Zac asked.

"Fifteen minutes ago," she said with a note of uncertainty.

Zac looked over at Ogras, who nodded and suddenly got swallowed in shadows, disappearing from sight. Zac probably possessed the speed to run them down as well, but he was pretty bad at tracking. Ogras was even faster than he was, and his skill set was far more suited to assassinating the slave drivers.

Those who remained hesitantly looked at Zac, their eyes occasionally darting toward their weapons again. But a burst of his blood-soaked aura quelled any thoughts of resuming their rebellion.

Zac coughed and repeated the same story to this set of slaves, about who he was and what had happened. This time, no one had seen the battle in the Grand Escape, so convincing the plantation slaves about the situation wasn't quite as simple. But the flight of all the Ez'Mahal personnel was a clear indicator that what Zac said wasn't without merit.

"What now?" one woman suddenly asked. "Where is the government? Will they help us?"

“I am sorry, but no,” Zac said, realizing that these people likely had no idea what was going on with Earth.

“The governments have all fallen, and a few new ones have taken their place,” Zac said. “Around 15% of the world’s population remains, the rest have fallen to incursions or wild beasts. Desperate battles are taking place all over the world.

“My armies are currently marching against a horde of tens of millions of Zombies. Yes, literal zombies like in the movies,” Zac said. “There is even an old monster heading toward Earth, a being so strong that he can destroy a whole city with a punch.

“So there is nowhere I can take you all. And honestly, even if I could, why would I? It costs a fortune to teleport someone, and the world has become too massive and dangerous to travel by road or air. But you are welcome to stay here. We are currently rooting out the last of the invaders, but this area will be part of my sphere of influence, and it will be somewhat safe at least,” Zac finished.

Hopelessness filled the eyes of the people gathered in front of him. Many had likely dreamt of being saved by the government, followed by a return to normalcy. But such a thing no longer existed on this planet, and it wouldn’t return until their place in the universe was secured through strength.

“Will we be forced to continue using these arrays?” the woman who pointed out where the overseer fled asked.

“No one should be using those things,” Zac said with a shake of his head. “From what I understand, they will sap your life force, slowly killing you.”

The colors of the faces in front of him turned noticeably better when they learned that they wouldn’t have to slave in the arrays any longer. Zac sighed when he saw their weak, erratic auras, and the next moment, a small hill of Nexus Crystals appeared in front of him.

“Each of you take one,” Zac said. “If you don’t know, these are Nexus Crystals. They are used for either restoring one’s energy or gaining levels. There is no side effect to using them, but they aren’t as effective for gaining levels as killing beasts.”

The slaves hesitantly looked at the mound of crystals for a bit until a few of them stepped forward. Zac noted that some of them were around level 15 to 22 and likely cultivators. These people had probably been caught the moment they returned from the Tutorial, and had barely had any progress since then due to the cultivation manual they were forced to use.

Since everything was dealt with for now, he took out a chair to wait for Ogras, and he fielded any questions the people in front of him had. As the minutes passed, more and more people were joining, especially after Zac told a few people to gather those out in the fields.

There were still quite a few who were still infusing their arrays, afraid that the odd situation might be a trap to trick them. But soon over a thousand people had gathered in front of him, each clinging to a Nexus Crystal as though it were a heavenly treasure.

“In the next few days, I will open up a store in the town. You can buy more Nexus Crystals there, or anything else you may need. From supplies to weapons and armor,” Zac said. “We only take Nexus Coins, though.”

“Most of us barely have any coins at all. How will we survive?” one of the braver men asked.

“Port Atwood will provide for everyone for a limited time, but sooner or later, you will have to provide for yourselves. You can either get jobs or hunt monsters for Nexus Coins and materials,” Zac explained.

“What can we even do? You’re level 74, but most of us aren’t even level 10. We weren’t allowed to gain levels; any energy we managed to gather went straight into these goddamn plants,” another man grunted.

“It hasn’t even been a year since the integration took place. I am sure it has felt like an eternity to you, but in terms of the Multiverse, it is nothing. If you manage to upgrade your race to E-grade, your life span will increase to five hundred years. Upgrade it again, you will live for thousands of years. What are a few months lost?” Zac retorted.

“The means to upgrade your race will be available for purchase in our shops. Even mortals can evolve their race,” Zac continued. “But you should know that nothing in this world comes free. Only those who struggle and gain enough resources will be able to afford the treasures needed.”

Quite a few of the haggard slaves perked up at Zac’s explanation. A fire rekindled in their eyes, shining with determination to overcome their current situation. However, Zac sighed when he saw that most of them were still downcast. But at least he gave a few of them something to strive for.

Not much later, Ogras returned with a lazy expression, his eyes flashing with a hint of disdain as he looked at how the slaves clutched their Nexus Crystals.

“I thought you would want to see this,” Ogras said as fifteen heads thumped down on the ground. “This should be the leaders of this place. I

didn't bother with the heads of the others.”

WAR

“The hordes will arrive in our designated war zone in eight days. We expect the second horde to come in contact with the coalition of Port Atwood and the Sino-Indians two days later,” Mark said as he looked down at the map.

Mark was a distant uncle to Thea, and he was assigned as her primary advisor for the upcoming war. The middle-aged man was a seasoned veteran of the Royal Air Force and a decorated general, so it was no surprise that he would be calling the shots in the battle against the undead. Officially, he was only here in an advisory role, with Thea being the figurehead.

Still, she wanted to understand as much as she could, even if she might not be the real strategist of the war. A lot of people would die in the upcoming weeks, some as a direct result of her commands. She owed it to them to do everything she could to keep that number as low as possible.

“Why don’t we immediately fight them?” Thea asked with a frown. “We’re giving them free rein over hundreds of miles of land.”

“For one, we want them as far away as possible from the incursion,” Mark explained as he pointed toward the edge of the Dead Zone. “The geeks have surmised that these hordes are large enough to affect the area, changing the Cosmic Energy into Miasma at a rate higher than they consume.

“But our goal is to splinter the horde and whittle them down, turning the horde into smaller groups that won’t have this benefit. If we can bring the units beneath the critical mass needed to maintain the transformation, we can starve them out. Even if they turn back at that time, they will have a week’s travel before they can resupply on Miasma,” the general said as he scratched his beard.

“But they will destroy all the towns in their path,” Thea muttered.

“Small price to pay. Besides, we have evacuated most of the people living in the path toward us,” Mark said.

“How long do you think this war will take?” Thea asked, her thoughts heading to Zac.

“At least a month,” Mark said with some hesitation. “Problem is we can’t tell how many elite warriors they have, and that will affect the speed at which we can dismantle the horde. They have a thick layer of trash out at the edges, and the cloud of Miasma blocks our vision of what hides in the core.”

“How many incursions do you think their team will be able to close in that time?” Thea asked, interested in hearing the opinion of a war veteran.

“I wouldn’t know, girl. You know his strength better than me. But it seems they want to keep the land they claim, and that will take far more time than the battle,” Mark said with a snort. “Port Atwood is about to get a real headache on their hands.”

“You know, you will need a better strategy than simply running interference,” Ilvere’s voice said as he walked inside the tent.

“What?” Alea said with confusion, once again looking down at the map detailing the progress of the undead horde.

“Lord Atwood.” Ilvere guffawed, drawing an even stare from the poison mistress. “I heard about your little stalking over in that human town. You even sent the little blue one to ruin the mood, no?”

“That is none of your business. Besides, it was to avoid letting that woman take advantage of us,” Alea said.

“I’m sure.” Ilvere snorted as he walked over to the table. “You should know that our cultures are different. I could simply beat up the others to court Lady Alyn, but that sort of approach seems to make the humans angry.”

“I don’t understand what you see in that bloodthirsty lunatic,” Alea said with a shake of her head.

“Perhaps I simply like living on the edge.” Ilvere smiled.

Alea rolled her eyes before she looked down at the table in silence for a few seconds, as if in deep thought.

“Am I a fool for pursuing this?” Alea suddenly asked.

“Following one’s heart is never foolish,” Ilvere said.

“When did you become so wise?” Alea said, some humor returning to her eyes.

“Well, I wasn’t blessed with a rich daddy or a pretty face, so I had to use my head for my conquests.” Ilvere grinned before once again looking down at the map. “So what are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that we will have to work a lot without pay. These things will barely bring any money per kill.” Alea sighed. “At least it will temper this pathetic excuse for an army.”

“If you think ours is bad, you should see the ones from that other force,” Ilvere said with disgust. “It’s no wonder their countries became food for the undead.”

“What do you mean?” Alea asked with confusion. “Our reports say their armies are almost three hundred thousand men strong, with more joining every day.”

“A large group of trash,” Ilvere said. “Armed with pre-integration weaponry. Most are below level 10. They will probably just turn into even more Zombies to kill. And all that energy and money being left on the table. I’d say that only fifty thousand or so are proper warriors, though their levels aren’t anything impressive.”

“What about the two elites who are on the ladder?” Alea asked.

“They act like they’re gods, but I’d be able to fight them both to a draw with my restrictions in place,” Ilvere said with a shake of his head.

“About the restrictions,” Alea slowly prodded. “Did you...?”

“Yeah, I got the quest. As did Janos,” Ilvere said. “But completing our mission comes first.”

“Agreed, but if we see the opportunity,” Alea said, drawing a nod from the demon general.

“And if those two get in the way?”

“Then they can join the undead general in hell,” Alea said with equanimity.

“If you were only this assertive with your private life,” Ilvere said with a final laugh as he left the tent, holding his breath to avoid the wave of poison that followed him out.

“Thank you as always, Miss Sui,” Ling Tian said as he stood up.

“You should rest some more,” Sui said as she looked at the back of her new team leader with worry.

He looked fine, but Sui knew that he was anything but. His whole body was a maze of scars from countless battles with the undead.

“I might not be a cultivator, but I can gain strength with these two hands,” Ling Tian said, tightening his fist. “More importantly, every Zombie we kill now will be one less to rampage across the settlements in the coming weeks. This is the final battle.”

“But you need to be alive to keep protecting the people.” Sui sighed.

“Haven’t you read the stories?” Ling Tian said with a youthful smile as he stood up to rejoin the battle. “The hero always starts out as a weakling, but soon grows into prominence.”

Sui didn’t know what to say as she saw the receding form of Ling Tian, unsure whether it was her place to butt in. She knew that many made fun of Ling Tian for his chosen name or what they perceived as a vain attempt at playing the hero.

But she truly felt he was a hero. He wasn’t overly strong, yet he dared to risk his life over and over. Who knew how many he had saved over the past months, relentlessly keeping the undead at bay in the area around Eastern Hills. That in itself was a great achievement. After all, he was not like that man.

Ling Tian was not able to single-handedly mow through an army with a swing of his axe, and his aura wasn’t as vast as the sea.

Suddenly, as if summoned by her thoughts, she saw the hunched-over form of Wang Fang walking by. By now, he was only a shell of the man he once was, with his cheeks sunken and dark circles under his eyes. The aura of life around him had long turned a murky yellow, compared to the vibrant gold that she usually saw around people. He was not long for the world.

“Enjoying the effects of your boyfriend’s scheming?” Wang Fang growled when he noticed Sui’s glance.

“David told you the water was poisoned and warned everyone not to drink it,” Sui said with annoyance, having repeated the same thing untold times.

It wasn’t only his body that had warped, but so had Wang Fang’s mind. His actions against David had caused the monastery to speak out against him in the end, causing their whole hunting squad to become pariahs in the whole

eastern border of the Dead Zone.

But not once had Wang Fang looked inward to his own failings, and instead squarely put all the blame on the man who called himself David. Of those who had ignored David's warning and partook in the cursed water, only Wang Fang was still alive, almost as though his hatred kept him going.

Their group had no choice but to travel to a settlement far away to avoid the angry mob wanting to curry favor with the Abbot. But they were soon driven out again due to Wang Fang's infamy and irascible personality. It was only at Ling Tian's town, Eastern Hills, they found sanctuary. Ling Tian took anyone in as long as they were ready to fight the undead threat.

"I might die soon, but that man might join the war. I will drag that schemer with me to hell if it's the last thing I do," Wang Fang growled after throwing Sui one last glance, walking away toward his tent.

"The next time we meet David will be the day he dies," a condescending voice said from behind. "How does he still not realize who he is?"

Sui looked back at John, one of the few Westerners who had lived in the Dead Zone since the beginning.

"The poisonous water has made him irrational and paranoid. He doesn't believe people when they explain how the description of Super Brother-Man in King's Crossing perfectly matches David," Sui said with some helplessness.

But, she wondered, would he be in the army they were heading toward?

"Your Eminence, the town of Port Atwood has once again arrived to check up on our status. Do you wish to meet with them?" the elderly monk asked after opening the doors to the secluded courtyard.

Abbot Everlasting Peace sighed as he looked up at the sky. Ribbons of gold crossed the sky above him, making him feel both wonder and despair. Everything would come to an end, but would he truly be able to sever it? Should he?

Was this truly the correct path toward enlightenment?

Brother Stillness looked at the wistful expression on the usually serene face, and worry started to mar his ancient face. He had assisted the Abbot for decades, and he had never seen such an expression.

“Your Eminence...?” elder Stillness said with concern as he took a hesitant step toward the pond. “Is it the Yin creatures? The mountain will provide sanctuary.”

“Brother Stillness, do you remember when we were young?” Abbot Everlasting Peace suddenly said as he looked at the elder monk across the pond. “This penniless monk ate the Yumberries that elder Small Mountain had grown with meticulous care behind his abode.

“When this one scurried away, he noticed Brother Stillness sitting in a tree not far away, witnessing the theft. Yet when asked by elder Small Mountain, Brother Stillness lied and said you ate them. Was this lie good or bad?”

The elder’s long wispy brows rose in surprise before he donned a thoughtful look.

“Lying is not only harming others, but it is also harming one’s self. It is a corruption of the path, and the Buddha decreed lying to be against one of the moral precepts,” elder Stillness said before he bowed in thanks. “Amitabha. Only through self-reflection can one find the path.”

Abbot smiled as he looked at the ribbons once more, his eyes turning toward the five pitch-black ones rising into the cosmos from various corners of the continent. Next, his eyes moved toward the silver ribbon inlaid with countless fractals, which as usual thrummed with recognition when it was being observed. He once again sighed and looked back down at his old friend.

“Small Mountain was not truly harmed by my theft. He never intended to eat them himself, and chalked it up to the berries going to their fateful owners.” Abbot Everlasting Peace smiled as he caressed the thick golden line connecting himself and elder Stillness. “Yet the shelter you provided a young scared acolyte proved to become a gesture that this penniless monk remembers even eighty years later.”

The old monk looked a bit confused at the Abbot’s exclamation. Was this a karmic lesson, or was the Abbot simply reminiscing? But he didn’t have the chance to inquire as the old Abbot suddenly rose to his feet for the first time in months.

“Abbot! Your wound?” Stillness exclaimed with worry, though he couldn’t hide the excitement in his eyes.

“What will come to be, will be,” Abbot Everlasting Peace said, stepping out from the lotus.

Small ripples expanded on the pond as the Abbot stepped on the water surface as though it were solid ground. But that wasn't what truly shocked the old monk.

The magical Zen Treasure that the Abbot had sat upon for months in order to recuperate started glowing and changing the moment that the Abbot stepped down from it. The flower radiated a holy light as it rose from the pond and flew up to position itself behind the Abbot.

As Everlasting Peace walked across the pond, golden Sanskrit started to appear in a script across the flower, which itself turned a holy white. In just seconds, it had turned into a Buddhist halo, with dense writings covering its every surface.

As Brother Stillness' eyes read the lines, his mind turned blank for a second before he felt an unprecedented clarity. His eyes, full of understanding, quickly moved to meet the Abbot's, who only smiled in response. Excitement filled Brother Stillness' heart for a second, but it soon was suffused by a deep sadness.

“Your Eminence, this means...?!” he hesitantly asked.

“What will be, will be.”

THE TAL-ELADAR

It took Zac three days to bring a semblance of order to Verdant Fields, which was the new name given to Grand Escape. The old name simply had too many bad memories associated with it. He initially wanted to head straight to the next incursion the same day, but he soon realized he had to give up on that plan.

First of all, the warriors needed rest. They weren't like Zac with his monstrous attributes. They had truly risked their lives in the battle, and most of the demons had various degrees of wounds, notwithstanding the high-quality gear that Zac had lent them.

It was easy to forget that they had charged into an army of hundreds of men with less than twenty people, even though they were just a little bit stronger than the defenders. It was almost a miracle that no one died. Of course, chalking it up to just luck was oversimplifying it. They had arrived with monstrous momentum, and between Zac, Ogras, and Billy, the enemies' lines had completely collapsed before they could mount a resistance.

Apart from rest and post-battle meditation to consolidate the Dao, there was also the need to consolidate the area. Verdant Fields was in the center of a region with extreme potential value, and Gredas, the old demonkin farmer, had immediately rushed over when he heard about the huge fields of Spiritual Soil.

They had quickly decided to transplant a large amount of the soil to Port Atwood and its neighboring farming islands, but this place would likely become the agricultural headquarters of his empire in the future. The herbs that were currently growing would be able to be used for medicinal baths, something that would be in extremely high demand on Earth in the coming

decades as people tried to evolve their race.

But restoring order to the area was easier said than done. There was not only the issue of clothing, feeding, and treating thousands upon thousands of liberated slaves, but they also needed to set up a working governing body. All while hunting the Ez'Mahal warriors who still hid in the population.

Zac had made fleeing Earth impossible in his fit of rage, but that had also left them with the headache of finding the invaders. This wasn't like the golem incursion where it was extremely easy to figure out who the enemies were, since the foreign invaders from the Ez'Mahal Empire were able to blend in with a change of clothes.

They were forced to bring over the array that Ogras had used to find the shape-shifters, but by the time they got the array running, most had already left the area.

The one thing that made their lives a bit easier was how quickly the noncombat classes had given up, and they hadn't caused any problem so far. Their people came from an empire completely based on slave labor, so a force being defeated and its people turned into slaves happened every day. It was lucky as well that they adapted to the situation so quickly, since there were tens of thousands of them.

Zac was shocked at the count, as the number of people far eclipsed what the demons had brought to his island. Usually, the incursions weren't too populous since it cost Nexus Coins to send everyone over, but noncombat classes were far cheaper compared to powerhouses.

But the biggest reason there were so many of them was that the invaders had gained their first round of reinforcements not long ago. It was inevitable that the incursions would be able to bolster their ranks within the first year, but Zac was still a bit disappointed that it had already happened. It didn't really affect them in this battle, but he had a feeling that they simply got lucky this time.

The Ez'Mahal had no strong enemies in the area, and Earth's performance hadn't impressed anyone so far. Zac, Billy, and Thea were the only ones who had defeated their neighboring incursions, and Zac's feat wasn't even publicly known. They likely hadn't felt there was any need to bolster their troops in the short run and instead sent over personnel to manage the slaves and help extract everything of value in the area.

Currently, the vast number of noncombat people were separated from the former slaves, and their expertise and actions were being tallied by his army.

They needed proper insight into what they were dealing with here.

As things started to get under control with the help of the personnel from Port Atwood, Zac and the others started to turn their eyes toward the next target. He and the others of the strike force were currently sitting in a conference room in Thanso's former mansion, planning their next step.

"Things are mostly settled here," Ogras said from the other side of the table. "Which one have you decided on next?"

Zac looked around the room and saw a wide range of emotions. The demons looked eager as ever, perhaps since two of them had managed to improve a Dao Seed after the battle. Apparently, one's connection to the Dao also improved when one evolved, though Zac didn't know if that also applied to himself with his weird constitution.

The Valkyries sat with stone-cold eyes full of determination. The pitiful lives of the slaves in the area had rekindled the buried memories of their own fates in Greenworth, and they wanted to keep fighting to free others who had been enslaved. For them, the battles weren't about resources or improvement, but about liberation.

Emily had returned to her happy-go-lucky self. She had been shaken by the evil perpetrated in Verdant Fields before they reclaimed it, but she had channeled that shock and rage into her desire to become stronger. And she was currently riding the power-leveling train that was Zac.

His rampage had actually awarded her almost two levels. Curiously enough, she gained almost all of it from the weaker soldiers, whereas the death of the incursion leader had awarded her next to nothing. It was at that point Ogras explained that she got a penalty due to the level difference, just like Zac gained no energy for killing weaker beasts by now.

It was a way to avoid too blatant exploitation. But the result was still above expectation since she'd gained quite a bit of Cosmic Energy without lifting a finger. It wasn't even impossible that she'd be able to break into the ladder if she followed Zac for a month or two.

"The one with the elves," Zac said, taking out one of the intelligence missives. "It's another force that has actively hunted outside their region for slaves. But this one isn't run by trash. They have some sort of detection arrays, and their defensive array is perpetually running. We will not be able to ambush them."

Ogras grabbed hold of the stack of information with a frown.

"The Tal-Eladar," he said, causing some bloodlust to leak from the

demonic soldiers. “I do not recognize their crest, though.”

The Tal-Eladar weren't truly elves, but Marshall Clan informally called them that due to their appearance. They had long pointed ears that slightly drooped at their tip and lithe frames, which brought to mind elves from fantasy stories. However, there were some differences between elves and the humanoids in the incursion.

First of all, their eyes looked a bit creepy, according to the report, and a comment likened them to goat's eyes, with oblong horizontal pupils and no sclera. Their teeth were also sharp, meaning they didn't live on morning dew and fruits like elves in the stories did.

Their actions of constant expansion and raids weren't very reminiscent of the harmonious bearing of the woodland people either. While the Ez'Mahal had been somewhat content with tending to their massive plantations, the Tal-Eladar had increased the size of their incursion threefold since the initial push. It was nowhere near the actions of the Undead Empire, but it was still a large-scale conquest.

That was one of the main reasons why Zac chose this incursion. The Ez'Mahal had been targeted for the combination of the horrible treatment of natives with their weak force. The Tal-Eladar were instead targeted for their constant expansion. Every time they conquered a new town, more people would be enslaved or killed, and nipping it in the bud as quickly as possible was important to stop their expansion.

But what Zac didn't expect was the reaction of the demons in the conference room.

“What's going on?” Zac asked with some confusion.

“The Tal-Eladar and the demonkin are in an almost perpetual war in our sector,” Ogras explained. “You remember how Clan Azh'Rezak makes their money as mercenaries? Our progenitor was a mercenary who made his name in a war against these people. In fact, most of our elders and veterans have fought in wars against the Tal-Eladar.”

“So it's a racial thing,” Zac said. “Well, we will still go by the standard plan. We will see how they have treated people. If it's like here, then they will get the same treatment. If they have acted within limits, then we will let them leave, no matter your bad blood.”

The demons looked a bit unwilling, but soon they acquiesced.

“Good. I don't want to have to lug around the Origin Array everywhere to hunt dissidents,” Zac said as he turned to Billy, who was sitting by one of the

ends of the table with a vacant stare.

“Billy, will you be able to fight?” Zac probed.

“Ah?” Billy said, waking with a start. “Billy can fight.”

“Good. We are going to another bad place, just like this place was,” Zac said. “We need you to thwunk their shield. Like you did in the hunt to save Thea.”

Billy seriously nodded.

“Mama always said the strong need to help others. Billy will help save the people.”

“Good,” Zac said. “Is there anything else that needs to be done here?”

“Everything is dealt with, except our lack of experts is making itself shown,” Ogras said with a sigh. “We don’t have anyone strong enough to hold down the fort.”

“I don’t want anyone to defend this place to their deaths,” Zac said. “If someone wants to take this piece of land, let them. I will make them give it back, and then some, after we’re done with the incursions. But I don’t want to leave these people to their fates if I can help them.”

“We do not need too large defending forces for now,” Ogras agreed. “I doubt anyone on this baby planet can block teleporters or perform other advanced siege tactics. But we simply do not possess the manpower if we wish to run a dozen spheres of influence from all the incursions we will conquer.”

“I think we can make use of the people here,” Joanna interjected.

A few of the demons threw her a dismissive glance. It wasn’t a dig at the Valkyrie, but rather about what they thought of the liberated humans. And it was true, there was not a single competent warrior as far as the eye could see. The Ez’Mahal had made sure of that. But Joanna ignored the looks and pressed on.

“I don’t mean for defenses, but running the places. We only need a small number of people to act as the police while we set up a local government. It wasn’t like we needed the army in every city in the old days, right? That butler who helped us can be the mayor or something,” she explained.

“I agree.” Zac slowly nodded. “Port Atwood has grown by incorporating new people from the beginning. There’s no reason not to continue doing the same here. But that leaves the issue of the tens of thousands of noncombatant captives.”

“Why not just keep them as slaves?” Ogras shrugged. “They’re already

mentally prepared for it.”

Joanna and the other Valkyries in the room were visibly upset at the prospect of Port Atwood turning into a force utilizing slavery, and Zac frowned as well. But he honestly didn't have any better ideas. He couldn't simply kill them all, and sending them back was impossible since the Nexus Hubs were inactive.

At first, he considered sending them to isolated islands in his archipelago, where they could work for Port Atwood without the risk of them fleeing, but he knew that was just slavery with extra steps.

“I know many empires in the Multiverse don't condone slavery. What do they do in cases like these?” Zac asked.

“Well, simply throwing them off the claimed territory is pretty common. What happens then is none of their concern. Most simply become fugitives settling in other areas on the planet. But the most common thing is doing nothing. It doesn't matter who sits at the top for the common people; life is mostly the same for them in either case,” Ogras said.

“Our situation is a bit more complicated than that, though, no?” Zac sighed. “If I simply released everyone, then the people of Earth would be furious, and I would be marked as a traitor in no time. And I refuse to release the soldiers or anyone who has stepped over the line in the treatment of the people of Earth.”

“What about this?” Ogras said after some thought. “They all are from this Ez'Mahal Empire, right? That means that they should be able to use the Nexus Hub to return there when the hubs open. Just have them work for passage until then. They will also be assigned a debt according to their actions in the invasions. This debt will partly go to us and partly to the victims as compensation.”

Zac slowly considered the proposition as he threw a glance at the Valkyries. They seemed to be mostly fine with Ogras' suggestion, and Zac knew he wouldn't be able to think of something better in the short run. But suddenly, something in Ogras' explanation hinted at another possibility.

“Wait, they will be able to return there? Doesn't that mean that you all will be able to go back when the hubs activate? More importantly, will you be able to come back here afterward?”

FINALITY

Zac's mind couldn't help going down various avenues of betrayal when he realized that the demons weren't as cut off from their home world as Ogras had initially led him to believe. What if Ogras' grandfather came stomping through Earth in ninety-nine years as a result of the scheming of the demons of Port Atwood?

"Where did that innocent wide-eyed youth go?" Ogras sighed in mock exasperation as he noted Zac's look. "Here, look at this."

The next moment, a screen appeared in front of the demon. It was the part of the status screen that showed his alignment, and it actually said Port Atwood. It didn't provide any title, though, like his own status screen that also denoted him as Lord.

"I've already told you, we have cut ties with our home world. To be able to use the Nexus Hub, you would need to maintain your allegiance," Ogras explained.

"What about the other demons? Not all of them stayed on Earth voluntarily," Zac probed, not ready to completely drop the subject.

"I have it all in hand. There are a few who maintain the old alignment, but as long as they work for us, it doesn't matter. Worst case, they'll have an accident before the world gets properly integrated." Ogras shrugged. "Besides, I don't think that's how it works."

"What do you mean?" Zac asked.

"From what I understand, it's a one-way ticket for those who have failed their invasion but managed to survive for a hundred years on a hostile planet. A reward of sorts, I suppose," Ogras explained.

Zac slowly nodded but made a mental note that he would have to research

how things worked from a second source as well. He knew that interplanetary travel was prohibitively expensive, but most D-grade powerhouses should have no problem teleporting themselves in case they felt the potential pay-off was large enough.

“In any case, this might also be a good opportunity to recruit some people,” Ogras continued. “Just like there were people like us who wanted to stay behind, so are there likely people from the Ez’Mahal who wouldn’t mind becoming Earthlings. I can’t imagine a great fate is awaiting these people if they return to the Ez’Mahal Confederation.”

“We can’t recruit these slavers!” Joanna immediately interjected. “Not imprisoning them is bad enough.”

“Girl, I know you had a rough start of it, but one needs to be pragmatic to survive. You are part of the Multiverse now, and the only law is the law of the jungle,” Ogras said with a shake of his head. “So what if they kept slaves? It was their right as the strong. And if you get strong enough, you can kill all of them without anyone speaking up in their defense.”

Joanna only unwillingly glared at Ogras, clearly not convinced by his argument.

“We’ll go with labor for reduced merits for now,” Zac finally concluded. “We’ll revisit the issue of formally incorporating the willing people at a later date, depending on how they behave. For now, is there anything else we need to do before we can head out toward the Tal-Eladar?”

“I would like to withdraw two hundred million Nexus Coins from Port Atwood’s coffers,” Gredas said, speaking up for the first time since the meeting began, as his only interest was agriculture. “I need your permission for that.”

“Two hundred million?” Zac exclaimed with wide eyes. “That’s not a small sum. What do you need it for?”

“The Spiritual Soil we will transplant to Port Atwood could become a true moneymaker for us,” Gredas said when he noted Zac’s shock. “You are approaching E-grade, and in another year or two, most elites of this planet will start evolving. The demand for medicinal baths will explode, and it will only keep growing.

“I want to plant huge fields of Spiritual Grass to prepare for that. But we need to buy seedlings and better arrays to get production going,” the demon farmer said, enthusiasm shining in his eyes. “It will give a return on your investment tenfold within a few years, and it will just keep giving as long as

we control the Nexus Vein.”

Zac slowly mulled it over. Two hundred million was less than he privately held, but it was still a large chunk of the free resources of Port Atwood. And agriculture was only one of the many expenses that the town faced. Who knew how much it would cost to integrate all these zones he was about to conquer?

But Zac also knew that you needed to spend money to make money. All that money would come back into his town coffers, which essentially was his own money. If worse came to worst, he could simply pillage and loot a few more incursions to make up for it.

“Fine, but you will have to make a proper budget to show what you need everything for. We are not in a position to waste any money at the moment,” Zac agreed.

With that, the meeting was over, and everyone was given two hours to prepare their gear. Zac didn’t need to do anything at the moment and simply went back to Port Atwood to have dinner with his sister.

Kenzie almost continuously stayed in the cultivation cave nowadays, since her AI allowed her to make tremendous improvements. No energy was wasted between the calculating power of the small chip and the improved cultivation manual that Kenzie utilized.

Zac only returned to Verdant Fields ten minutes before the deadline, and the others were already waiting. The laid-back manner of the demons was gone, replaced with bloodlust and determination. It appeared that old habits died hard, and they still carried their inherited grudges, even if they had cut ties with Clan Azh’Rezak.

Zac activated the teleporter, and they soon arrived at their destination. It was a large hall without windows, and only two young men sat by a table at one side of the room, looking fidgety.

“Thank god you’re here,” a man immediately said as he hurried over when he saw Zac and the others appear. “The town is being raided as we speak!”

“Raided? By the invaders?” Zac asked with some surprise.

“We believe they found out that this small town possesses a teleportation array and is used for intelligence gathering. Their force is a lot bigger compared to the usual raiding parties that they use to capture new workers,” the young man frantically explained.

“We’re almost out of crystals to maintain our shield, and it has only been

three hours,” the other man added. “We have sent requests for aid from headquarters, but their resources are all tied up in the war with the undead. We have been instructed to start evacuation in twenty minutes.”

“How many are there?” Ogras asked as he walked up next to Zac.

“Around three hundred warriors, and many of them are stronger than their normal combatants. They also have over a thousand of their huge wolf-things with them,” the guard explained.

“Tal-Eladar and their goddamn war beasts,” one of the demons muttered, making Zac shoot a questioning glance at Ogras.

“Well, the main reasons our family keep a bunch of barghest and gwyllgi is because the Tal-Eladar are extremely adept at Beast Mastery,” Ogras explained. “Their beasts are stronger and better controlled, so we can only try to lessen the impact with waves of dumb barghest. Better our fodder dies to the war beasts than our warriors.”

“So what do you think we should do with this army?” Zac asked.

It wasn't that Zac was unsure whether they could defeat the army outside the gates, but rather that he wasn't sure if it was the right move. His tactic was to hit fast and hard with a small squad before the enemy could prepare themselves, and decimating an army would hamper that strategy.

“Good opportunity to gather some up-to-date intelligence,” Ogras said with a spurious smile, though the killing intent was palpable in the room.

“Won't it be a problem if they find out we're here?” Zac hesitantly said.

It was unethical, but perhaps it was better to let this town fall if it meant that they could attack the incursion unnoticed.

“The intelligence report was clearly flawed. It never mentioned this large a number of war beasts. We probably have no chance of succeeding in a surprise attack as it stands; those things are like scouts,” Ogras said. “We might as well weaken their forces a bit. An attack like this should be led by one of their generals, and killing him would make our lives easier.”

Zac finally agreed, and the troop streamed out of the Marshall Clan headquarters that hid the teleporter. As they exited the building, they immediately spotted a large number of people standing in the square, fearfully looking in the same direction. It was the townspeople who were likely waiting to be teleported out if things went sideways.

Zac's eyes followed theirs and saw a large shimmering shield that continuously shuddered from attacks. It was clear, however, that they were content to slowly drain the power of the defenses rather than forcefully

breaking it like Billy usually did. This tactic was much slower, but it also didn't waste any resources.

"I can handle this alone," Zac said. "No need for others to expend their energy."

Ogras seemed fine with it, but the other demons were raring for battle. However, a look from Zac made them look down. Zac's overbearing strength made them pretty much consider him a powerhouse of an earlier generation, and they wouldn't dare speak against him even if they had recently evolved.

"You'll get all the battle you wish for, and more, before the month is over," Zac said as he flashed away toward the gate.

It only took him a minute to reach the newly erected wall, where he saw a few soldiers trying to kill at least a few of the beasts swarming right outside the shield. But the Tal-Eladar easily intercepted the ranged attacks, allowing the beasts to rake the shield unimpeded.

The animals were one size larger than even the barghest, and he understood why the guard had called them wolves earlier. These things likely weighed as much as a bison, but they possessed a far more balanced build, allowing for both power and agility.

However, their faces didn't exactly look like wolves, but rather like the head of enormous vampire bats. They possessed two wide pointed ears and pitch-black eyes. The nose was pretty flat, and beneath was a large fanged maw. Its paws possessed nasty claws as well, and judging by the powerful aura the animals emitted, they would have no problem ripping a person in two with one casual swipe.

"Who are you? Head to the square with the others!" a guard captain exclaimed with some shock when he noted that Zac had appeared next to him out of nowhere. "We might need to evacuate you all at a moment's notice."

"I'm the reinforcement," Zac calmly explained. "Do you know who the leader of their army is?"

"Reinforcement? You alone?" the grizzled captain said with some doubt.

Zac only sighed as he leaked some of his aura.

"I'm sorry about that," he hurriedly said with a pale face as he involuntarily took a step back.

"It's fine." Zac shrugged. "Their leader?"

"We think it's that guy with a green band on his arm at eleven o'clock," the captain said, not directly pointing to him out of fear of alerting the man. "He single-handedly routed our try at breaking out and culling these animals."

We lost half our men in five minutes.”

“Thank you,” Zac said with a somber expression, and the next moment, he disappeared again.

A monstrous killing intent suddenly billowed out in the middle of the animal pack as Zac appeared with **[Verun’s Bite]** in his hand. Any thoughts of right and wrong that had plagued him the past days were completely suppressed, replaced with ruthless finality.

The frenzied roars of the war beasts were soon replaced with pained wails, and just a few minutes later, the sounds of battle were replaced with an eerie silence. Zac stood alone in a field of blood and viscera, his robe fluttering in the wind, completely untouched by the carnage.

One Tal-Eladar warrior was all that remained, and he was lying on the ground with extremely bad wounds. The arm with a green band was lying a few meters away, still gripping a broken spear. The rest were all dead or had fled fast enough for Zac to not bother with them.

A whole army dying would be immediately noted by a proper force like the Tal-Eladar, and they likely already knew that the army had fallen through the use of life-bound talismans. Catching each and every soldier wouldn’t really stop the news from reaching the incursion, so Zac had opted not to pursue the fleeing soldiers.

“Who are you? This world shouldn’t have someone like you,” he said with a wet cough.

“There are no absolutes in the Multiverse,” Zac said as he looked down at the warrior who had valiantly fought to stop his onslaught. Of course, it had been impossible to completely curtail Zac’s advances, but it had allowed some of his men to retain their lives.

“What will you do with our people?” he weakly asked, obviously understanding what would happen next to the incursion.

“That depends on how you treated our people in captivity,” Zac said.

The humanoid man sighed with relief as he closed his eyes, his last breath slowly leaving his lungs.

From the ramparts, the soldiers looked down in awe and horror, unsure what sort of Grim Reaper had arrived to their town.

VERANA TIR'EMAREL

It didn't take long until the rest of the squad joined Zac on the field of death. Emily and the Valkyries looked a bit shaken by the carnage that Zac had unleashed, but the demons nodded approvingly. However, there was one demon who didn't look pleased: Ogras.

"When you do something, you go all out, don't you?" Ogras said as he appeared a few seconds after the others. "What happened with questioning them? We already knew our intelligence was incomplete, yet you killed or scared off everyone."

Zac took a deep breath, calm slowly returning to his mind. He felt a bit sheepish after hearing Ogras' admonishment. What he said was completely true. They needed intelligence. But the moment the battle had started, he had completely ignored that need, only focusing on killing everything in sight. Any reason to hold back had been discarded with some flimsy justifications, all to be able to keep swinging his axe.

Luckily, Ogras had acted quickly and caught a warrior who managed to flee the scene. Zac looked at the demon general, who looked back with a frown.

"I need a second. Find out anything you can from the man," Zac said and flashed away with his movement skill.

Ogras' words were a true wake-up call. He had already started to sense it during the last battle, but after this slaughter, he was sure. Something was wrong with him, and his bloodlust made him lose control in battle. He quickly moved away to a secluded spot and sat down.

First, he checked his gear and possessions, but nothing seemed out of sorts. The only thing that had changed recently was his robe, but he sensed no

bloodlust from it. It even gave a soothing and calming sensation, and Zac doubted it was the source of his ruthless behavior. Yrial was a bit flakey, but he would have warned him of something like a side effect.

Suddenly, he had a bad premonition as he looked inward. His internal sight quickly moved to the pocket of isolated space in his mind, and the sight made him despair. The miasmatic seal that was sealing away the **[Splinter of Oblivion]** had changed, and a small passage leading out of the space had somehow formed.

Weird energies, which Zac only could liken to distilled corruption, slowly seeped out of the crack and blended with his mental energy the moment it emerged. The amount was so small that if he hadn't specifically looked for it, there was no way he would have noticed it in the short run.

Zac wanted to slap himself from holding himself back from asking Yrial for any tips about what to do with this cursed thing in his mind. He had thought about it, but eventually, he had decided against it out of paranoia. If he had known that the seal would break so soon, he would have made the splinter his highest priority.

Different plans to handle the leak cropped up one after another in his mind, but they kept getting rejected for being unfeasible. The power of the splinter was simply too great, and nothing he could get his hands on would be able to block it out. His mental defensive skill had been completely crushed by it earlier, and he wouldn't fare much better today even with his recent power-ups.

But as he despaired over what to do, he noticed something odd. He had initially assumed that the seal was breaking, but a few signs indicated something else was happening. For one, it didn't seem like the defensive runes had lost even a smidgeon of their initial power, but instead, a few more fractals had formed.

It was through these new fractals that the small amount of corruption seeped out and entered his mind, and even though the tendrils of the splinter desperately tried to wriggle out, only a small amount of corruption managed to get through. Even more importantly, the corruption that entered his mind was different from that of the splinter. It was, for lack of a better word, dead. There seemed to be no inherent will in it, and it did nothing to spread or take over his mind.

A new theory was quickly formulating in his mind. The true use of the miasmatic formation in his mind wasn't to seal away the splinter, but rather to

absorb it in a controlled manner. The crack wasn't truly a weakness, but a planned opening to let the corruption through after modification.

But the energies were still purified destruction, carrying a hint of the supreme Dao of Oblivion. Even if it wasn't tainted by the inherent will of the Heart of Oblivion, it was still energy that was extremely troublesome for Zac to handle. Who knew what sort of effect it would have on his body?

He kept looking for a bit but couldn't make heads or tails of the situation. He could only gather that the change had happened recently, likely just before or during the last battle. He would have noticed it otherwise since he checked up on it now and then.

It also was a relief of sorts, since the change in the fractals somewhat indicated that the Draugr woman was an ally rather than yet another enemy. He had initially considered the possibility that she'd placed the fractals in his mind to safeguard the splinter until she could rip it out of his head. But that felt less likely now that it seemed that she had devised a way for him to absorb it for himself.

"So are you going to tell me what's going on with you?" Ogras voice was suddenly heard from behind, making Zac look over.

"Some complications from my encounters." Zac sighed. "Luckily, I noticed it in time, but I am not sure what the effect will be in the long run. Alert me if I start becoming... murderous."

"Murderous?" Ogras snorted after a long pause. "That's just great."

Zac only helplessly shrugged his shoulders, indicating that he wasn't ready to disclose anything else. And it was not like the demon was placing all his own cards on the table. Something had happened in the inheritance, but he'd never made any effort to explain exactly what had transpired.

"Anyway, we questioned the captive. Turns out they had spies among the Marshall Clan. Normal humans working for them, not shape-shifters or something like that. They recently learned about us and the destruction of the Ez'Mahal and immediately moved to destroy the teleporter. They were just unlucky they were picked next by you; otherwise, they would have been safe for the time being," Ogras explained.

Zac nodded his head. He wasn't surprised any longer that some people would choose to side with the invaders. If Thomas Fischer could ally with monsters like the Dominators, why wouldn't some local people ally with the incursions to gain power and safety?

"What about their forces and human captives?" Zac asked.

“The situation of this Tir’Emarel family is actually pretty similar to Clan Azh’Rezak. Though they didn’t have the bad luck to get stuck on an island with a humanoid netherbeast,” Ogras said, drawing a roll of Zac’s eyes. “It’s to the point that I don’t think it’s a coincidence.

“They are a newly formed family just like us, barely qualifying as a D-grade force. They only got the chance to keep their incursion slot thanks to the huge war that our old sector is embroiled in, just like my own family. I think that if my invasion didn’t fail early, I would have gotten a quest from the Ruthless Heavens to battle it out with these people,” Ogras said with some wistfulness.

“Well, sorry for ruining the cosmic plan.” Zac snorted. “So the strength of their leader should be around that of Rydel’s?”

“Seems a bit stronger, as Rydel still hadn’t evolved when you fought. This Verana Tir’Emarel has evolved and gained some sort of great opportunity after arriving, and she has spent most of her time in meditation since. Anyway, they possess a Nexus Vein, which naturally means various goodies have cropped up in the area, sort of like Port Atwood,” Ogras continued.

“So, the humans?” Zac probed.

“Most work in the mines or the fields, though they are treated decently enough. No soul-sucking arrays or anything like that. Not all are actually slaves, it seems, and the mining parties are actually overseen by humans or Ishiate foremen,” Ogras said. “They have some program with freedom for contribution. Sounds like a scam to me.”

“A scam?” Zac repeated with some confusion.

“It seems that these people aren’t planning on staying for much longer. It’s not surprising, with the Undead Empire being here and all,” Ogras explained. “I guess they are dangling freedom as a carrot to have people work harder until they cut and run.”

“Without making a lot of enemies in the long run,” Zac added with a thoughtful nod. “Neither your people nor the Tal-Eladar seem too bad compared to the Zombies and the Ez’Mahal. Why are your species hostile?”

“Who knows anymore?” Ogras shrugged. “The war has lasted forever. The original reasons are long forgotten. Now it’s about stealing resources and birthing powerhouses through slaughter. The Ruthless Heavens always provide bonuses during wars since it’s one of the best ways to forge true warriors.”

“Well, we’ve wasted enough time. They will undoubtedly find out about this battle soon enough. Let’s not give them too much time to prepare,” Zac said as he got back up on his feet and walked toward the group waiting in the distance.

The others were ready to go, and they immediately set course for the incursion. This time, they didn’t plan on sneaking inside, so the Valkyries took out a handful of modified cars from their Cosmos Sacks. Far more effort had been spent on strengthening and adapting these cars compared to the ones at the Marshall Clan.

Zac didn’t drive this time either, instead opting to sit in the front seat, training with the mental dexterity puzzle. If his mind was slowly being infused with a foreign force, it was more important than ever to have a firm grasp of his mental energy. Perhaps if he could control his mind better, he would be in a better position to contend against the mind-altering effect of the Splinter of Oblivion.

They met no obstacles or traps as they drove along the road, but Zac wasn’t really happy about it. They had passed two strongholds that should have been manned by small frontier forces, but both of them were completely abandoned. They all felt it was pretty fishy, and the most likely cause was that the Tal-Eladar were gathering their forces for a concentrated defense.

Their fears were soon realized as they closed in on the core area. An army consisting of over ten thousand beasts and well over a thousand soldiers solemnly stood lined up, awaiting their approach. The scene caused some worry amongst the small squad of Port Atwood, but also some confusion.

Why didn’t they fight from within their arrays?

“What’s going on?” Zac muttered with some hesitation.

“I guess we’ll find out,” Ogras said as he nodded ahead.

A woman stepped forward from the orderly line and walked fifty meters toward his convoy before she stopped. On her shoulder, a small alien creature sat perched, looking like a ball of fur with four glistening eyes. She also had a white furry pet tucked in her arms, which seemed to be contentedly snoozing away.

“I am Verana Tir’Emarel. Am I correct in assuming that Zachary Atwood, Super Brother-Man, is visiting?” she said with a strong voice carrying across the empty field.

Zac gave Ogras a nonplussed look before he stepped out of the vehicle to see what was going on.

“I didn’t believe the rumors of you working together with the treacherous demonkin at first. But seeing his wretched appearance, I can only assume you defeated them and turned them into somewhat competent workhorses?” she said after throwing a scathing look at Ogras, who stepped out of the car after Zac.

Zac’s mouth couldn’t help but turn upward with some mirth, but he didn’t believe the demons were too happy with the comment, even if Ogras donned a smiling face.

“Girl, what is your goal by confronting us like this? I don’t think even the half-animals of the Tal-Eladar to be stupid enough to step out of their arrays unless necessary,” Ogras retorted, causing a wave of killing intent to billow toward them from the army.

“In contrast to the horned goats of the Azh’Kir’Khat Horde, we know when to advance and when to retreat,” she answered without missing a beat. “You hid it well, but we have already learned of your great power, Mr. Atwood.”

“Well, thank you, I guess,” Zac responded, still not sure what was going on.

“I have a proposition for you. Even with your great power, the Tir’Emarel family are no weaklings, and we have prepared for your assault. You might be able to defeat us, but not without casualties,” she said, her eyes moving toward the cars behind them. “Not everyone in your party is as strong as you.”

Zac frowned and was about to speak up, but Verana continued before he could say anything.

“You should already know that our family is young, and a lot of our resources are tied up in this invasion. The massacre of our whole incursion would cause lasting damage to our force, and the loss of one of our battalions is all the Tal-Eladar blood I want to see. So instead of further bloodshed, why not settle this with a duel? You versus me, one on one,” she said.

Zac’s brows rose in surprise, and he looked over at Ogras for his opinion.

“It’s not a bad idea. If they try to double-cross you, just go a bit murderly on them all,” Ogras said. “Saves me a lot of effort as well, so win-win.”

Zac mulled it over for a few seconds, but he saw no true downside to the proposition. If he could conquer another incursion without losing a single soldier, it would be for the best.

“Fine,” Zac said as he stepped forward, [**Verun’s Bite**] appearing in his

hand.

“Lulu! Grub!” she said, placing the two small animals down on the ground.

Zac first thought that she wanted to let her pets get to safety, but his eyes widened the next moment. Terrifying auras started to leak from the beasts as they almost instantly grew to reach almost ten meters.

In just one second, the small fluff balls had turned into terrifying killing machines that clearly were well into the E-grade.

GRUB AND LULU

Zac felt pretty small and vulnerable for the first time in a while as he looked up at the ferocious beasts that trembled with battle intent. He looked over at Ogras and noticed that the demon had taken out a lounge and some refreshments during the transformation of the small pets.

“Uh, isn’t this against some sort of rules?” Zac hesitantly asked as he glanced at the E-grade animals once more.

The one called Grub had turned into an extremely odd beast that reached ten meters above the ground. Half its body was an enormous head with a mouth that seemed to be able to open 180 degrees. It didn’t possess sharp fangs, though, but rather huge flat slabs of teeth, looking like they were meant for crushing rather than tearing.

Its legs were short and stubby, but it radiated immense power, even if it looked a bit funny. The thick fur that covered it looked extremely coarse and dense, forming a natural armor covering its entire body. Zac felt that it should be a Strength- or Endurance-focused beast that excelled in raw power. It would likely possess a Dao Seed such as Heaviness to deliver devastating chops that could crush a large boulder without a problem.

Lulu seemed more speed-based, as it had turned into a slightly smaller beast with long slender appendages. Where the fur of Grub was extremely thick, this animal possessed a long white mane that looked extremely luxuriant as it glistened under the sun.

Zac wasn’t exactly sure what sort of attacks he could expect from Lulu since nothing about it seemed very threatening apart from its aura and size. It didn’t have long fiendish claws like some beasts, and while its fangs were sharp enough, it didn’t look like an animal that used its mouth as a weapon.

What stood out about it were the oversized ears and eyes, and the closest Earth animal that Zac could liken it to was a fennec fox, except it had a shorter snout. Zac wondered if it was a beast that focused on spells rather than physical prowess. It was rare, but Zac had learned from Alyn that many such species existed in the Multiverse.

“I’m a Beast Master; they are my weapons. Is you using your axe against the rules?” Verana retorted from behind the legs of the one she called Lulu, a scornful glare adorning her face.

“Contracted beasts are generally considered a part of one’s strength,” Ogras agreed with a nod. “Since you need sufficient skill and strength to tame them. Be careful; her power comes from making her beasts even stronger than they already are.”

Zac only sighed and cracked his neck as he walked forward, but he was inwardly relieved he’d agreed to the duel. These animals seemed extremely dangerous, and he wasn’t sure that the shields produced by the Valkyries would be able to handle the force they would be able to generate.

He tried to use **[Inquisitive Eye]** on the two animals as he walked forward, but something blocked the skill completely apart from confirming their names. He sensed that energy stirred around Verana the moment he used his skill, and he guessed that she possessed some safeguards against spying on her animals.

“So if I defeat you and these two things, your force will leave Earth immediately,” Zac confirmed with a steady voice.

“Agreed. But if I win, we will be able to stay here for fifty years, provided that you all don’t get swallowed up by the undead swarm,” Verana countered.

Zac frowned as he considered the proposition. He didn’t believe he would lose even against these two behemoths, but he still went over her words carefully. Fifty years wasn’t a long time in the grand scheme of things, but it would likely be enough for them to completely strip the area of anything of value.

Still, it was only a small part of Earth, so Zac felt there wasn’t too large a downside to her terms even if he lost by some chance.

“Agreed, provided that you provide basic rights to your citizens and don’t expand from your current zone,” Zac agreed as he unleashed his aura. “Otherwise, I will just come back.”

No more words were needed, and immediately, Grub released an

earthshattering bellow that shook the whole area as a powerful aura started to radiate from Verana as well.

Zac immediately activated [**Loamwalker**] to strike straight at the source, the Beast Master herself. Being a tamer was like most other classes that utilized minions, such as necromancers or summoners. Their main strength usually lay with their minions, whereas they weren't too powerful by themselves. If he took down Verana, he would win without even having to battle the two animals.

The earth shrank beneath his feet as he made a beeline for the Tal-Eladar, but as he closed in on her, he started to feel a greater and greater restriction on his movements. He finally realized that the huge bellow that Grub was still releasing wasn't simply a bestial roar, but rather some sort of domain attack.

Zac wasn't able to pinpoint how it actually worked, but it wasn't like a gravitational field, so he felt unencumbered. But the efficiency of his movement skill was almost completely gone, slowing him down by a huge degree.

A large fractal edge formed on his blade as he shot a glance at the stocky animal, and he immediately imbued it with a Dao. The fractal turned silver as the Dao of Sharpness imbued it before he shot it straight toward the mouth of the animal. He was hoping to force the beast to close its mouth, stopping the restriction on his skill.

The beast closed its mouth as Zac hoped, but when the enormous teeth slammed together, an immense shockwave was created that instantly reached Zac. He only had time to steady himself before the attack punched into him with enough force to instantly kill most people of Earth.

A trickle of blood ran down from the corner of his mouth from the shock to his system, but he hadn't been truly hurt by the attack. Unfortunately, his strike against Grub hadn't proven effective either, as it had turned its head away with startling speed, letting the edge hit its thickly furred side instead without much impact. Some of the thick hair was carved off, but the fractal edge didn't even draw blood.

Some killing intent started to bubble up in Zac's mind, and he realized that it was the corruption that was discreetly egging him on to start a slaughter. But now that he knew what to look out for, he didn't have any problems stabilizing his mind, forcing himself to remain cool and collected as he surveyed the battle.

The stocky beast seemed extremely sturdy while also possessing restraining skills, making it a troublesome enemy to quickly take down. Zac chose to ignore it and instead started to run toward the Beast Master again, this time without a movement skill. He still possessed close to 300 Dexterity, so even though he couldn't utilize [**Loamwalker**], he still moved like the wind.

Grub started bellowing again, putting further strain on Zac as he ran, while Cosmic Energy Started to swirl around Lulu for the first time in the battle. Zac formed five more blades and shot them toward Lulu to shut it down before it could do anything, without stopping his own advance.

The blades ripped through the air with tremendous force, but the beast made no effort to dodge. Its huge eyes instead lit up in an almost blinding blue radiance, and a wave of extremely pure white-blue flames surged forward.

Oddly enough, he couldn't sense any heat from the incoming attack even though it consisted of enough energy to make the air twist and distort around it. Zac initially planned on pushing straight toward it, but he quickly changed his mind when his fractal blades were incinerated in an instant.

The damage his fractal edges sustained were transmitted to his edge, and the enraged roar of Verun echoed in Zac's mind as the Tool Spirit woke up from the damage. Zac himself growled in frustration and stopped his assault to back away from the incoming blast wave. At this moment another shockwave suddenly arrived from the other beast, making Zac feel like he was punched in his gut.

Irritation started to build up in Zac's mind as he turned two bloodshot eyes toward Verana, who seemed to be utilizing some skill behind her two beasts. Large amounts of Cosmic Energy swirled around her as she stood completely still with closed eyes. It looked like she was controlling one or both the beasts with her mind, rather than fight with her own body.

The ground cracked beneath his feet as he once again tried to rush toward the Beast Master, this time with [**Nature's Barrier**] swirling around him to hopefully block some of the incoming strikes. But it was clear that the two beasts hadn't shown all their cards.

A huge sun ignited above the head of Lulu, and ray after ray blasted toward Zac, ripping the emerald leaves to pieces after a few shots. The attacks were pretty strong, but not to the point that he couldn't destroy them with a swing of his axe if they passed his defense. But it did noticeably slow

him down, allowing Grub to launch its next attack.

The fat beast suddenly disappeared as the sky turned dark. Zac looked up with confusion, only to see the enormous maw of Grub opened wide right above him. Zac didn't know what happened next as his head slammed straight into the ground with enough force to cause large cracks to spread out.

A groan escaped his lips the next moment when the extremely heavy beast landed straight on top of him, causing a huge shockwave to spread outward. It was like a bomb had gone off in the area, causing widespread damage to the ground.

Zac's mind started to get muddled from pain and anger, but somehow he managed to actually push upward and lift Grub above his head with a bestial roar of his own. With a grunt, the stocky animal was lobbed straight at Verana, and its short legs floundered as it tried to right itself in the air.

The lithe frame of Lulu moved like lightning as it picked up the still unmoving form of Verana in its mouth, moving her out of harm's way. Grub crashed into the ground the next moment, causing another shockwave. This time, quite a few of the Tar-Eladar soldiers were impacted, though they were only thrown down on the ground without any real injuries.

A roar echoed in Zac's mind once more to complement his own anger, and then the spectral form of Verun appeared, even though Zac hadn't summoned it. Perhaps seeing its master being hounded by the two beasts had ignited its competitive spirit, and it turned into a hurricane of violence as it pounced on Lulu the moment it moved away from its mistress.

Zac's brows rose when he saw that the ghost-white flames of Lulu seemed able to harm Verun, but that alone wasn't enough to deter the frenzied Tool Spirit. A wail escaped Lulu's mouth as a large section of its fur was ripped off along with parts of its shoulder in a large bite of Verun's oversized jaw.

A tremendous pressure suddenly ripped apart the remaining parts of Grub's domain as the wooden hand of **[Nature's Punishment]** emerged from the void. It shot straight toward Grub, which had just got back on its feet, looking a bit disoriented. But it quickly steadied itself as it tried to deter the hand with a concussive series of sound waves.

Pieces of wood kept raining down from the hand, but the damage quickly healed before any lasting wounds could be caused. The dense fractals on the hand lit up in green the moment the hand closed on the animal, and the next moment, an indent was formed in the ground from the pressure of the

enormous fractal in the air.

Creaking sounds could be heard from Grub's thick bones as it was forced down on the ground, and the large hand moved toward its neck. Energy surged around Verana as a thick shield above her companion, but it immediately shattered on impact, making her cough a mouthful of blood and open her eyes for the first time during the battle.

Both beasts were occupied, and Zac rushed straight at the Beast Master, who had just received a backlash from her attempt to defend Grub. He hadn't initially wanted to use his ultimate attack since it consumed so much energy since evolving, but he found no better alternative. The combination of the trio was too annoying, and he could only brute-force his way through them before he wasted too much power.

He knew that he had less than half his Cosmic Energy remaining after summoning [**Nature's Punishment**], so he needed to immediately end the battle so that he would still have enough energy in case something unexpected cropped up afterward.

"Wait, I give up!" Verana shouted with wide eyes as she saw Zac barrel toward her with the momentum of a runaway beast horde.

To prove her words, she swallowed a familiar black pill. Next, the scene of the sudden and unexpected death of an incursion general repeated itself just as Zac reached Verana.

GROWTH

Zac mutely looked down at the unmoving form of Verana before going over the prompts he'd just received. As expected, he got confirmation that the area had been put under his control, and he once again got the opportunity to appoint a mayor.

The two beasts shrank back to their noncombat form the moment that Verana fell over, and they slipped out of Zac's restraints due to their diminutive size. Both of them scuttled over to their master and cried pitifully when she didn't move, trying to look threatening to keep Zac away. Zac only shook his head in bemusement as he ended his skill and exhorted Verun to come back.

The Tel-Eladar army didn't move a muscle, even though quite a few of them looked extremely displeased. Then again, it was too late for them to do anything by now, with Zac standing within arm's reach of their leader. He could easily use her as a hostage in case they mounted an attack.

As he waited for Verana to resurrect, Zac chose to look inward. He wanted to look at the splinter right after the battle to see if anything had changed. He had sensed that it slightly woke up during the battle, though he felt he was able to block its most obvious manipulation of his emotional state.

But conversely, he had roared in anger and thrown an enormous beast at his enemy like an enraged King Kong. It felt a bit out of character for him, and he was afraid that the corruption was slowly changing his personality without him noticing.

He could at least breathe out in relief when he saw that the miasmic barrier hadn't changed or weakened in the slightest from the battle. But he still felt an even greater urge to quickly evolve to E-grade.

Evolving wouldn't have a direct boost to his attributes, as they came with gaining levels. But it did seem to strengthen one's mental power considerably since people had a much easier time advancing their Daos, according to the demon warriors. Perhaps that would also help with his own problems. Anzonil's disciple had been able to stay sane for over a decade without the help of any miasmic fractals.

The Tal-Eladar leader woke up a bit later, the effects of **[Coward's Escape]** having passed. She breathed out in relief when she saw her two companions were safe apart from their battle wounds.

"Thank you for not killing me while I was dead," she said with a slightly raspy voice.

"Why did you go so far as to eat that pill?" Zac asked with some curiosity as he calmly watched her get back to her feet.

Since she had swallowed the pill, the battle was truly over. She had already failed the invasion, and their path home would close in a few hours. There was no way for them to turn things around as things stood, so Zac wasn't too worried about Verana scheming something.

"I was afraid you wouldn't trust my surrender and kill these two cuties out of precaution," she said as she fed her two pets healing pills. "A deal's a deal. The Tal-Eladar will leave this planet immediately."

Zac internally breathed out in relief when he saw that she wouldn't make any trouble. But he also knew that there likely wasn't much she could do at the moment. When his eyes went to the two small critters who happily cried in her chest, he noted that their auras were pretty weak and erratic, far worse than their wounds could explain.

Zac felt that it was likely that her class could instill her beasts with increased power for a short duration, but that it left both parties weakened afterward. Sort of like his own skill **[Hatchetman's Rage]**. They had likely fought above their usual power from the start, just to have a shot at defeating him.

"I have another proposition," Zac suddenly said as he looked at Verana.

She hesitantly looked at Zac, with her eyes occasionally darting over to Ogras, who was sauntering over.

"Are you going back on your word?" Verana asked somberly.

"No, your people are free to leave. But there is no rush. You have eight hours, right?" Zac said, receiving a nod in confirmation.

"We will not be a party to some demonkin scheme," she immediately

declared when Ogras appeared in earshot.

“Since when has the Tal-Eladar been worthy of our scheming? You always run in headfirst like your contracted animals.” Ogras snorted as he walked up next to Zac, giving him a small thumbs-up as his evaluation of the battle. “What are you thinking?”

“You said that your force put a lot of their resources into this invasion. Why not stay behind for a hundred years?” Zac said. “This area will become part of my kingdom, but the Tir’Emarel can maintain a stake in its resources.”

This wasn’t completely an impulse decision. He had already noted how understaffed they were after conquering the last incursion, and he knew just how huge an impact the demons had had on Port Atwood. Just a tenth of their people had stayed behind, but they had enabled Zac to create a faction that had almost everything a proper Multiverse force needed.

Keeping some of the invaders in his employ would make his life a lot easier. They both possessed strong fighters and experienced noncombat classes that could easily manage this small area for him. It would allow him to keep the benefits.

Such a strategy wouldn’t work with most forces, but Ogras’ mention of how similar this force was to his own planted the idea in his mind. Most forces invading Earth wouldn’t even consider allying themselves to Zac, but the Tir’Emarel family was pretty weak and recently established.

Even if they set up a connection between the two forces, Zac felt it unlikely they would be able to be a threat to Earth in a hundred years. The cost of the invasion would likely be greater than the gains, making it more profitable to turn it into a business venture instead.

Getting a permanent off-world trading channel would be a huge opportunity for them, and could even turn into one of their main revenue streams. The Mercantile System was great, but sometimes it was far more cost-efficient to take the trade outside it.

The Mercantile System wasn’t without its demerits. The most glaring one was the prices the System charged for teleporting products. Things that weren’t too valuable couldn’t be traded through the system since it added costs based on both value and volume.

That was why they couldn’t simply sell off all their surplus gear made from the ant shells and wolf pelts through the Mercantile System. The System would eat up all of their profits, keeping them for itself. In such cases,

manually transporting the goods was a much better option if the items couldn't be sold locally. Teleporting a Cosmos Sack was quite a bit cheaper than a person, allowing for interplanetary trade as long as the volumes were large enough.

"That would leave us stranded here for a hundred years, though, without being able to contact home. And at your mercy," Verana skeptically said.

"A hundred years is just the blink of the eye in the Multiverse," Zac insisted. "You'll be back before you know it."

Verana's brows contracted in thought, and it looked like she was seriously considering the offer for the first time.

"That still leaves the issue of what would happen to us if the Undead Empire succeed in their assault. They never care about other forces. Everyone will be forced to leave in a hurry or become undead themselves," the Beast Master said.

"Well, it is a gamble on this planet's power, I guess," Zac said. "You would have to leave at least as many fighters as noncombat classes, and they would be expected to join me in our defense against the undead and any other enemies of Earth."

"This... I cannot make a decision of my own on this matter. Will you give me an hour?" she said after hesitating a bit.

"Sure," Zac said with a nod, letting Verana return to her forces.

"Allying with the Tal-Eladar," Ogras muttered as he watched the back of Verana. "Are you trying to make sure my people will never be able to go back home?"

"Hadn't you already cut ties with them in any case?" Zac smiled.

"Well, whatever. The beastmen can be considered somewhat competent," Ogras reluctantly agreed. "Much better than the riffraff we scrounged together from the former slaves of Verdant Fields. But you shouldn't expect things to go this smoothly at the other incursions. This Verana seems weakhearted, treating both her beasts and slaves with unusual care."

"I know." Zac sighed. "But better make friends than enemies where we can."

The two sat down and rested for an hour until Verana finally came back.

"I have spoken with my elders, and they have agreed to your proposal, though the terms of our future co-operation will be decided when this planet is released from its isolation," Verana said.

Zac immediately agreed, as that was better for him as well. He could only

imagine that his position could improve as he grew stronger in the future, which would let him keep more of the benefits.

“We will leave six hundred of our people, half of which are warriors as you requested,” Verana added. “They know that they will be part of your sphere of influence, but they are Tir’Emarel in the end. They will not accept any orders to be used as fodder or do things against their conscience.”

Zac was internally elated at the number of warriors he’d just gained. Three hundred veterans were as good an addition as his whole demonkin force and far more valuable than thousands of his recruits.

“Will you be staying behind as well?” Zac probed, hoping he would get another powerhouse under his command.

“No, my grandmother does not allow it and has ordered me to return,” she said, actually looking a bit disappointed. “I will leave two of my generals to manage our interests, though, and they should be a greater addition than some flakey demon silk pants.”

“Have fun cultivating like a bird in a cage while we conquer a world and explore the Multiverse.” Ogras snorted in return.

The three went over the details for a while longer, until Zac insisted on checking out the situation of the humans who lived within the incursion. If the people of Earth had been secretly treated as cattle, everything they had decided until now was moot, but Zac was relieved to find that the situation was as they had heard.

The humans within the Tal-Eladar didn’t live luxuriant lives, but they were better off compared to most people since the integration. They had a roof over their heads, they were fed, and the Tal-Eladar kept any beasts at bay. They weren’t even stopped from cultivating, though they were expected to provide a certain work quota every day first.

Still, many had secretly held some hatred for the Tal-Eladar and were screaming for blood when they learned that Super Brother-Man had conquered the area. Zac ignored those clamors, even if it caused some dissatisfaction. Zac could only hope that they would understand when they learned how the rest of the world had fared since the integration.

After making sure everything was under control, they watched the thousands of Tal-Eladar stream through the large portal the Nexus Hub had opened. A few looked despondent, but most actually looked relieved, like they were finally heading home after a long time abroad.

To Zac’s left, the hundreds of people who would stay behind were lined

up, bidding farewell to their people. It looked like Verana hadn't compelled anyone to stay behind since most of them had excited expressions on their faces, even though they knew they would be stranded here for a hundred years.

Staying behind was a risk, but it also provided many opportunities. If they survived the initial phase, they could enjoy the Origin Dao for at least a decade longer, besides the other benefits that cropped up on a newly integrated world. It was an opportunity that most people in their situation could only dream of.

He did occasionally sense some killing intent coming in his direction from the soldiers though. Zac knew it was most likely due to the army he'd decimated earlier. It was inevitable that his rampage had caused some bad blood, but he could only hope they would do their job. It all came down to the two generals whom Verana left behind.

PEAK

Zac judged that the two leaders were around the same level as his demonkin generals. One was a mage while the other was a Beast Master like Verana. The Beast Master was named Jinan, and he would take a co-leadership role of this area along with whomever Adran appointed.

The mage was called Tylia, and she would join the Strike squad as support and ranged firepower. She was a nature mage, one who possessed some healing capabilities along with mainly control spells. Healers were something that Zac desperately lacked, and he felt it would be a great addition when going after the incursions.

However, a change happened at the last moment before the incursion closed. Verana, who had stayed behind to make sure all her people passed through, suddenly turned to Jinan.

“Jinan, take my place. I will stay behind after all,” she said.

“What?” Jinan said with some shock. “What about the Grand Matriarch? She will skin us alive.”

Zac and Ogras only looked on with interest. It looked like the young mistress of the Tir’Emarel was a bit willful after all. Verana took out a crystal and placed it on her forehead for a few seconds before giving it to her general.

“Give this to Grandma. I’m sure she’ll understand. I am betting on this baby planet for the future of our family,” Verana said as she dragged Jinan to the Nexus Hub and veritably threw him inside moments before it closed.

“That’s what I get for taunting her,” Ogras muttered under his breath. “A silly girl with dreams of adventure.”

“It’s not like it’s the first time your mouth has gotten you into trouble,”

Zac said, suddenly in an excellent mood.

Not only did he get another powerhouse at Ogras' level, but he also had a feeling that adding the Tal-Eladar to his force would balance it out. Currently, most of the important positions in Port Atwood were held by the demons, but the demonkin and Tal-Eladar would restrain each other, allowing his human faction to grow stronger while they competed.

If Verana went according to her original plan, the elves would only have two generals and would not be able to have as great an impact as the demons. But with Verana and her two beasts holding down the fort, they suddenly became an equal force to Clan Azh'Rezak.

"I guess you're stuck with us for the time being," Zac said as he turned to Verana, who was walking back toward them.

"I felt uncomfortable leaving my people to the whims of that one," Verana said as she threw a look at Ogras.

Ogras only rolled his eyes in annoyance but decided to keep his mouth shut for once.

"We will head out to the next incursion almost immediately. Do you want to join us?" Zac probed.

"Lulu needs more time to recover, and they both need at least a week of rest. I used a berserking skill on them to push them to their limits, and if I send them to battle now, it will truly harm them. I will stay and organize things here," Verana said.

"That's fine." Zac nodded, not surprised in hearing about her pets. "Figure things out with Adran or Abby, my two head administrators. I don't allow slaves, so figure out a system for the people who live here."

"You should take Tylia, though," Verana added, which was just fine with Zac.

The integration of the zone went far smoother compared to the Ez'Mahal incursion. Thanks to the Tal-Eladar staying behind, Zac only needed to leave some peacekeeping troops before his group was able to move toward their next target. He also instructed Adran to move the former slaves who caused trouble to some of his other towns so that they wouldn't cause any further unrest.

Zac chose one of the easier targets after Tylia had entered the contract of secrecy. That way, she wouldn't be able to tell anyone about his undead form in case he was forced to use it, not even her own master. Zac could only thank the Apostate of Order for creating the system of binding contracts.

The incursion was situated by a large volcano and was controlled by some species that looked like a mix of humans and dragons. The assault started out fine, with Billy utterly destroying their erected defenses with a tremendous smash, but trouble cropped up almost immediately.

The battle produced their first casualties, even though they followed their strike plan and Tylia performed above expectations. Two demons and a Valkyrie fell in battle, which wasn't a lot of people, but still a sizeable chunk of the small elite troop. They hadn't done anything wrong, but they had been forced to defend against much too strong an enemy.

The problem rather lay with Ogras, who had performed far beneath what was expected. The two of them currently stood in front of the three bodies, who had been cleaned and lined up. They would be sent back to Port Atwood to be properly buried later that day. Zac felt especially bad about the Valkyrie.

Her name was Jennifer, and she was among the first dozen to follow him back in Greenworth. She wasn't a cultivator, but she had desperately clawed her way toward the top of the Valkyries with sheer effort. Yet now she lay here unmoving, grisly wounds covering her body.

Death could come at any moment.

"What's going on with you? I've seen your strength, and it looked like you were holding back," Zac finally asked after Ogras failed to speak up. "Now we lost three competent fighters."

It wasn't that Ogras had shirked his duties during the battle – it was rather the opposite. He had desperately fought with his spear to take down the generals while Zac battled the leader and his support squad. But the shadows, which were a large part of his repertoire, had been completely absent, which left the demon with almost no battlefield presence.

It had allowed one of the generals to veer off against the exhausted Billy and the demons, and if it weren't for Tylia, half the squad might have been eradicated before Zac unleashed [**Hatchetman's Rage**] to fight almost the whole incursion alone.

"It's that goddamn lunatic," Ogras finally spat out after some hesitation.

"What? Who are you talking about?" Zac asked with confusion.

"The Umbra." Ogras sighed.

"Kenzie told me you looked bad after exiting the inheritance. What's going on?" Zac probed.

"I got quite a few benefits inside, but the man called Rez also forced

something extremely troublesome on me. He had found an odd entity that lived within others' shadows in his journeys. Like a parasite. He never found a way to utilize it while alive, but he always believed it had great potential to strengthen one's shadows," Ogras explained. "So he used me as an experiment to find out if he was correct."

"Let me guess, he made the two of you merge?" Zac sighed.

"Knocked me out, and when I woke up, I had this netherblasted critter in my shadows," Ogras growled and waved his hand.

A blob of shadows grew from his arm, and a terrifying face appeared in front of them. It reminded Zac a bit of the ghastly beings from the hunt, though this thing seemed more corporeal. It soundlessly screeched at the two of them before it once again receded into Ogras' shadow.

"Pretty creepy," Zac muttered.

"Tell me about it," Ogras said with a shake of his head.

"But what does that have to do with this battle?" Zac asked.

"Its presence has increased both the power and volume of my shadows, but my control has lessened. It normally doesn't interfere, but it looks like it doesn't like fire. The moment we entered the battle and all the flame-attuned energies started swirling about, it hid deep within my shadows, making me unable to send out any attacks," Ogras helplessly explained.

Zac shook his head, inwardly swearing at Brazla, both the real one and the Tool Spirit. Forcing people to pay for treasures by setting up inheritances was clearly a great way to create death traps for one's descendants. Zac suddenly felt lucky he only got a predecessor who was just a bit eccentric and disinterested in passing on his true inheritance.

"Any other surprises waiting for me?" Zac sighed. "We don't have a lot of people to spare, you know."

"I have no idea. I didn't even know the parasite had this weakness. That asshole didn't really leave an instruction manual. He just gave me a couple of rewards and told me to come back in a decade if I survived the fusion. Going to go back alright, if just to kill that ghost," Ogras swore.

Ogras' powers having turned unstable was a wrench in the plans, but he was still the strongest fighter on the squad even without his shadows. Besides Zac himself, of course. And so far the only weakness they had encountered was that of fire, and there were no other clear fire-attuned enemies apart from the incursion in the underworld.

This time, it took two days to get everything in order. The addition of

Tylia sped up the recovery of those who were hurt, helping the soldiers get back to fighting strength in record time. The dragonlings were one of the forces that killed or pushed out all other races from their lands, so taking control of the volcano didn't require any work at all. They simply erected a teleporter and sent a dozen scouts to scour the area for anything of value.

One good thing that came out of Zac being forced to go all out was that he felt he was getting extremely close to finally gaining his level. So he immediately opened the teleporter to their next target the moment that everyone was healed up and ready to go. The soldiers had taken the deaths in stride, as they all knew that assaulting multiple forces in short order was an extremely risky venture.

But the gains were quite impressive as well. Joanna had informed him that the Valkyries had all received a quest after they'd closed the third incursion. It was an incursion-closing quest sort of like the one he'd gained for the demonic incursion, but it gave out variable rewards depending on how many they managed to close in the coming month. So they were the ones most eager to get going, even though they mourned the death of Jennifer.

The fourth target was another humanoid race, but this time, things didn't go according to plan either. As Zac sat in the front seat and played with the mental puzzle, he suddenly got a bad premonition. He immediately took out his axe, which alerted the others in the car.

"Something is wrong," Zac only had time to say before a huge number of projectiles flew straight at their cars.

Zac immediately activated [**Nature's Barrier**] and infused it with the Seed of Sanctuary. The skill had no problem covering the entirety of the convoy since the seed had been upgraded to the Middle stage from the Dao Impartment. But the ambush cost him over half his Cosmic Energy as he was forced to reform countless leaves to keep his people safe until they could get in position.

Ogras disappeared from his position in the back seat, and immediately after, he appeared in the sky above the cars, two huge black wings covering his back. He was clearly anxious to regain his honor from the last battle, even to the point that he used his ultimate transformation. He thrummed with unrestrained power as a sea of shadows swallowed a large sector of the forest that hid the invaders.

Wails of pain echoed among the trees as innumerable shadow lances destroyed anything within reach. One of the leaders of the ambush even fell

from a beam of concentrated shadows before Zac even had time to reach the hastily formed defensive lines.

The strength of the response to their ambush had flustered the invaders, and a few even started to run away when they saw Zac barrel toward them, his towering aura spreading out in all directions. Only a small core of elites maintained the ranks, and they formed a small elite unit to counter his advance. But they were an established force of the Multiverse, and they had their own hidden aces.

A huge golden bell appeared in the sky above the leaders of the ambush, while the leader of the ambush held a perfect miniature copy of it. His eyes met Zac's, and the next moment, he swung the bell with a somber expression. His face turned completely pallid, and it even looked like he aged a bit from the action.

A towering aura was suddenly released from the bell, and it was as though it were sentient. Zac felt an extremely powerful presence focusing on him, and he only had time to summon another layer of leaves before the bell rang. Its chime contained a mysterious force, and the moment it hit Zac, he immediately fell over, his vision turning black.

When he woke up again, he saw the backs of the Valkyries standing in front of him, desperately maintaining a barrier as he heard Billy's bellow ahead. He quickly got to his feet again with some embarrassment and rushed forward after activating **[Mental Fortress]**. That bell had unleashed a terrifying mental attack, and he had forgotten to protect against that type of assault after being pelted by normal spells and arrows.

A glance around the battlefield proved that they had still managed to keep the advantage, even with his own incapacitation, in large part thanks to Ogras' huge expenditure of Cosmic Energy. Zac noted that the demon's aura was starting to get unstable, and immediately flashed forward with **[Loamwalker]** to relieve the pressure.

The moment he truly entered the fray was also the beginning of the end of the battle. The invading army had already lost all of their momentum from the massive losses Ogras and Billy had caused, and the addition of Zac at full fighting strength completely broke their spirits.

The incursion truly had put everything in this ambush, as they'd fielded four generals and the incursion leader himself in the fight. He had tried to flee at the last minute, but Zac ran him down and cut him in two. The moment he'd tried to kill them all with a sneak attack was the moment he sealed his

fate.

Zac stood over the bisected body of the E-grade leader, his eyes closed as a huge amount of Cosmic Energy washed over him.

He had finally reached the peak of the F-grade.

BLOOD FOR BLOOD

Zac couldn't bother with the cleanup of the battlefield, as his mind was too preoccupied with other things. He had finally reached level 75, and he was anxious to see the gains it would bring. He knew he had become extremely powerful for a planet this early into an integration, but this battle proved that he was by no means invulnerable.

The most common way of closing incursions for newly integrated worlds was with massive armies to drown the invaders through sheer numbers. Such a tactic required the whole world to come together and sacrifice millions of lives, and it was because of this that so few newly integrated planets made it through the early phase.

Planets who passed the initial stage through the effort of solitary powerhouses were far less common since normal powerhouses like Thea or even Salvation weren't enough to single-handedly close all the incursions of a world. He knew that the Marshall Clan had taken huge losses from the subjugation of their incursion, even with Thea's help. It took something out of the norm, a monster in human form like Zac, to close them as they did now.

But even Zac felt he was barely able to hold on. The cultivators of the incursions came from a wide array of forces, and many of them possessed all kinds of hidden cards that Zac had never encountered before. The bell was such an example. It had knocked him right out without him even having time to react.

So the power-ups of reaching the peak of F-grade were just what he needed to have greater confidence to tackle the stronger incursions as well. He only hoped that the quests for the final skills would be possible to

complete quickly, and he eagerly opened up his status screen to see what had changed.

Name: Zachary Atwood
Level: 75
Class: [F-Rare] Hatchetman
Race: [E] Human
Alignment: [Earth] Port Atwood – Lord

Titles: Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Noblesse, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt – 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step

Limited Titles-

Dao: Seed of Heaviness – High, Seed of Trees – Peak, Seed of Sharpness – Middle, Seed of Hardness – Middle, Seed of Sanctuary – Middle, Seed of Rot – High

Core: [F] Duplicity

Strength: 605 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 134%]
Dexterity: 297 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 134%]
Endurance: 752 [Increase: 71%. Efficiency: 134%]
Vitality: 441 [Increase: 61%. Efficiency: 134%]
Intelligence: 167 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 134%]
Wisdom: 226 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 134%]
Luck: 140 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 134%]

Free Points: 21

Nexus Coins: [F] 364,950,610

He had made quite a bit of money closing the last incursions, and he felt he needed to do something with his fortune soon. Perhaps he could invest it through Calrin, or at least use it to deploy more projects like the large-scale

agriculture program. As it was now, he had no personal need for the coins, and they were no good collecting dust in his status screen.

His attributes hadn't noticeably changed, though, with one surprising difference. It looked like the final level awarded ten levels' worth of free attribute points, meaning he was awarded twenty points plus one from his class. Twenty points weren't a lot for Zac by now, but they would get heavily boosted through his titles. He also noticed a change in his title screen, and first opened that window.

[The First Step: Reach Peak of F-grade. Reward: All Stats +5.]

It was a bit disappointing that he didn't get another "first in world" title, but either there was no such thing, or one of the Anointed had snatched it. But from his experience, he felt the former to be more likely since he had a lot of other titles that the Zhix should have stolen if they shared the same title pool.

When he opened his quest screen, two new quests awaited him, though he was slightly disappointed there was no new quest on his Sovereignty chain. But when he looked at the requirements to complete the two Class Quests, he started to grimace.

Class Quests

Deforestation (Class): Cut down a Tree reaching 500 meters in one swing. Reward: Deforestation Skill (0/1)

Hatchetman's Spirit (Class): Form a nature- or axe-attuned Dao Fragment. Reward: Hatchetman's Spirit (0/1)

Zac didn't get any descriptions of the skills, but going by their names, he felt that **[Deforestation]** should be the ultimate offensive skill of his class, perhaps something akin to Nenotheop's Spear World. **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** might either be a defensive skill or some sort of Support skill, something to complement **[Hatchetman's Rage]**.

[Hatchetman's Spirit] was both simple and hard to complete. Forming a Dao Fragment was something he would definitely do before evolving, but it was not something he was able to complete in the short run. It looked like he wouldn't have the skill to help him during the incursions, and perhaps not

even in the Tower of Eternity.

The [**Deforestation**] quest reminded him of his first Class Quest. That time, he was supposed to chop wood, and now he needed to chop an enormous tree. He didn't think it would be too hard to chop one down; he simply needed to supersize a [**Chop**] and imbue it with the Dao of Sharpness.

The problem was that he hadn't heard of any trees of that size on Earth. Did they even exist? Things did grow bigger from the Cosmic Energy, but there were no such trees at Port Atwood at least. He would perhaps need to visit Westfort quickly after claiming this incursion to have their intelligence department see if they could find anything.

The next question was what to do with the twenty-one free points. Finally, he chose to go all out on his main attribute, Strength. He was starting to veer away from the standard 2:1 balance with Dexterity, but with all his titles, he already had more points in Dexterity than many agility-based classes would have at his level.

He did briefly consider putting the points in Wisdom to improve his mental defense. The attack from the bell was a poignant reminder that his mind wasn't as sturdy as his body. But he would have to put a huge number of points into Wisdom to make a difference, and he felt it was more efficient to buy more mental defensive treasures to shore up that weakness.

Since he was done with his status screen, he got up to his feet and walked toward the others. The Valkyries seemed quite excited when he approached, and he looked at them with some confusion.

"Congratulations on reaching level 75. Next stop E-grade!" Joanna said with a smile as she held Nenotheop's spear in her hand.

The two had been inseparable since she got it, and she alone had likely killed as many enemies as the other Valkyries combined with its help. It was truly a testament that attributes were not the only important thing for a cultivator, the right equipment was almost equally important.

"Thank you." Zac smiled as his eyes glanced across the forest to see how the cleanup of all the gear and Cosmos Sacks went. It appeared they were pretty much done.

"Don't forget about our appointment. In fact, stay away from the Nexus Node so you don't get any ideas," Ogras' voice suddenly echoed from the shadows.

"I know, don't worry," Zac said with a snort.

But Zac knew it wasn't inconceivable that he would simply skip going if

it came to that. Things were heating up on Earth, and he wouldn't hesitate to evolve if things got desperate. He would lose a top-tier title and the opportunity to make strong allies, but one needed to be alive to enjoy those benefits.

"Are there any movements from the incursion?" Zac asked.

"None that we can see," Ogras said with a shrug. "The ambush contained most of their elites, it seems. The others have likely evacuated by now unless they are fools."

Zac agreed. He had already got the notification that this area was under his control as well.

"That begs the question on how they knew we were coming," Ogras muttered.

This was something that had crossed Zac's mind as well. Just how had these people known to lie in wait?

"They may have some sort of diviner," Ogras added. "But there is a simpler solution. I think the Marshall Clan might have realized we are even stronger than they expected. Perhaps they thought we would lose elites from every battle, leaving us considerably weakened after we had finished closing the incursions. But when they saw that wasn't the case, they tried to make it happen by leaking intelligence."

Zac was about to disagree with Ogras' words without even considering it, but he stopped himself. He truly didn't believe Thea would do something like that, and Henry's main focus was on ridding Earth of all invaders. But the Marshall Clan consisted of thousands of people, most of whom had no relation to him or Port Atwood. Some people might have betrayed their cooperation in a misguided attempt to help their clan.

"We will report it to the main branch of the Marshalls, and we'll just have to be more careful. I have some things I need to look into with the Marshall people as well," Zac eventually said as he started to walk toward their cars. "Let's go secure the core town."

"Joanna has reached the ladder!" another of the Valkyries suddenly blurted out when it was apparent that Zac was preparing to leave.

Zac's eyes widened, and he quickly stopped in his tracks to open the ladder. It was true; Joanna was currently in the ninety-eighth position at level 47, meaning she had gained three levels since the assaults started. He wasn't too surprised considering how high the levels of their prey were, but his brows instead rose when he saw the name she had chosen.

98th – Atwood Valkyrie Joanna – 47

“Congratulations. But why not use your own name?” Zac asked.

“We need the world to know that Port Atwood is not just you and the demons; no offense, Ogras,” Joanna explained. “Hopefully, we’ll get a few more of the Valkyries on the ladder soon. We had already decided on this naming scheme long ago in case we ever got on the ladder. It was quicker than we expected.”

“Great job; keep it up,” Zac said with a smile. “And it’s a good idea. I’ll put out some good rewards for anyone of Port Atwood who reaches the ladder, no matter which one. Try to figure out what you want, and I’ll try to make it happen.”

The group made their way toward the core city of the incursion, but they didn’t hurry in case they had left more ambushes on the way. Luckily, no attack arrived, and they drove straight through the wide-open gates of the alien town four hours later.

But Zac was enraged the moment they entered the walled city, as the invaders had left a gift for him. A mountain of human corpses was thrown into a pile reaching over fifteen meters high in the main square. The whole area was dyed red from thousands of liters of blood, and a hastily written message was scribbled on the walls in red.

“‘Blood for Blood’ it says,” Ogras said with a frown. “Foolish.”

Zac ground his teeth as he looked at the scene that could be straight out of a nightmare. The blood still hadn’t dried on their bodies, meaning they were probably executed the moment these people noticed their leader had fallen. Killing innocents who were no threat just as some sort of petty revenge could only be considered extreme cowardice. They could just have left through the Nexus Hub, but they stayed behind to butcher all these people out of spite.

“Blood for blood,” Zac repeated with anger smoldering in his eyes. “They’d better pray I don’t find them in the Multiverse later. Search the area. If any invaders remain, kill them.”

Zac himself walked over to the pile and personally put them all in a spare Cosmos Sack before he bought a new teleporter. These people had been enslaved in life and killed for no reason. Giving them a proper burial was the least he could do.

While the forces of Port Atwood secured the area, he headed over to Westfort. Ogras insisted on coming along, saying that Zac might back down

too quickly in their interrogation. Zac could only acquiesce, and he thought it was fine since Thea was away at the front lines in any case.

Roland Marshall rushed over ten minutes after they arrived, and when he heard they needed intelligence, he drove them to one of the large mansions within the inner wall. It was the headquarters for the intelligence arm of the Marshall Clan, and if anyone knew of any such trees, it would be them. Zac explained what he was looking for, though he didn't mention it was due to his quest.

“So, have you found any trees like that on Earth?” Zac asked.

“Well, there is a species of trees from the Ishiate world that grew almost as large as the redwoods of Earth. A few of them might have grown larger than five hundred meters by now,” the intelligence officer who had been assigned to help them out thoughtfully said. “But I would avoid those trees unless you truly need them.”

“Why?” Zac asked with a frown.

“From what we have gathered, the trees are called Treefathers, and they are holy places to the Ishiate. Even the technologically inclined camp of the beastmen considers the trees holy. If you cut down one of them, you might inadvertently declare war with the whole Ishiate population,” the man explained.

“Is there no other place?” Zac sighed, wanting to avoid that kind of trouble if possible.

“Well, there are the actual redwoods,” the man said. “Many of them were over a hundred meters before the integration, so one having mutated and grown to five hundred meters is within the realm of possibilities. We have many other examples of plant life growing to that degree compared to their former sizes,” the man said, but his face was still troubled.

“So, spit it out. What's the problem?” Ogras snorted.

“The former redwood forests are within the Cradle of God.”

THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

Zac's face soured when he heard that he would have to enter the belly of the beast if he wanted to evolve his skill. His initial plan was to reach level 75 and get his two new skills before assaulting Salvation, but now it looked like that idea was impossible to achieve.

He had already discarded the idea of felling one of the so-called Treefathers. For one, they weren't as tall as the redwood, according to the report he was holding in his hand. They rather grew wide, whereas the redwood grew tall. And he didn't feel right about essentially killing the representation of the Ishiate's ancestors.

Still, there was some hesitation in his mind until Ogras suddenly motioned him to the side and erected one of the small array disks that Zac had brought from the hunt. It isolated the small area around them, and Ogras' shadows did the rest to completely obscure the two.

"What do you need such a high tree for? You never mentioned anything like this," Ogras said. "I thought we were here for rooting out the spies and dragging out some compensation from these fools."

"Compensation?" Zac blurted out with raised brows.

He'd never even considered such a thing and had simply wanted to fix an issue that the main branch of the Marshall Clan perhaps wasn't even aware of. To demand compensation at this juncture seemed a surefire way to sour the relationship with the Marshall Clan, which felt especially ill-timed now that he had just taken in another group of invaders.

"Don't go overboard. I'm sure your stock around here isn't the best since your stunt at the auction." Zac sighed. "And I need the tree for my class."

"You need an enormous tree for your class?" Ogras repeated with a blank

face. “Never heard anything like it. Does it need to be five hundred meters? The ones I spotted in the Mystic Realm weren’t that tall, but still pretty huge.”

“It’s five hundred meters minimum,” Zac said with a shake of his head.

“So what are you thinking? Do you want to assault this Salvation guy immediately?” Ogras probed.

Zac threw a look at the intelligence officers around them. They were clearly curious about what was going on inside the portable array, but they all kept a respectful distance.

“I think it would be for the best. I don’t have any power-ups coming up, I think, apart from a few improvements of my Dao. My other skill quest won’t be finished in the short run either,” Zac said.

Ogras thoughtfully mulled over the information before he nodded.

“Might as well. But I don’t think our current lineup will be very useful against that person. He might seem to have a huge army on the surface, but in reality, he is only one entity from how you described him. There are no elites and no generals, just Salvation and his puppets. Bringing a bunch of weaklings will only slow us down,” Ogras said.

“Us?” Zac asked with a raised brow, ignoring the comment of the others being weak. Why was the demon so interested in heading into a heated battle?

“As I mentioned, I got a few goodies as compensation for the forced fusion with this shadow-bastard. I think fighting Salvation with his odd class might be beneficial for me. I have never heard of anything like it before; it’s even more mysterious than your class,” he said.

“So what do you propose?” Zac asked.

“Well, others can’t enter his little kingdom without being spotted, but that doesn’t necessarily include us,” Ogras said. “I say we sneak inside, cut down a tree, and kill the guy when he comes to investigate. The others could use the break to consolidate their gains. Many should be able to gain or upgrade a Dao Seed from the recent battles.”

Zac nodded in agreement. He even felt that a few of his own Dao Seeds had even improved through the massive gains he’d just received from the inheritance. The most notable was Sharpness, the Dao Seed that he’d used the most since gaining it. He was even considering using one of his remaining Dao Treasures to push it one step further before heading to the Cradle of God.

“Do you need to prepare anything before we go?” Zac asked, tacitly agreeing with Ogras’ plan.

“I just need a few hours in Port Atwood to make sure my shadows are fed and stable,” Ogras said after some consideration. “She gets a bit agitated otherwise.”

“Great.” Zac nodded. “We’ll head back after this. I will try to improve a Dao Seed to at least get a small boost before we fight Salvation. That guy is the strongest person I’ve met considering his level.”

“Which is what makes him so intriguing. Now for the next issue,” Ogras said with a malicious smile as he turned off the array and dispersed the obscuring shadows.

“Don’t do anything crazy,” Zac said with some helplessness.

“When have I ever?” Ogras answered, throwing Zac a youthful smile as shadows flooded the room.

Things took a pretty nasty turn from there, with Ogras essentially taking the entire building, including Roland, hostage until a young man was brought in front of them. He was called Henry Marshall, named after the current patriarch, and his ambition matched his name.

He wasn’t part of the main branch, though, and was rather part of a distant branch. Before the integration, he had barely been considered part of the clan. But since the world changed, he had been allowed into the fold, where he had been desperate to prove himself to improve his lot.

He had already been suspected of cooperating with the I’Rallashar, the humanoid clan that had just ambushed them, giving intelligence in return for cultivation resources. After hearing that Zac’s group was ambushed, he was immediately captured and brought over by the chief of the Marshall Intelligence Bureau, a thin and unassuming old man named Charles.

A cursory search of Henry’s home was all that was needed to find ample evidence of his culpability.

“So, what punishment will this little guy get?” Ogras sneered as he looked down at the quivering man on the ground.

Charles simply pointed at the forehead of what could be considered his distant nephew, and the next moment a hole appeared that immediately started to leak blood and brain matter. The attack was silent and deadly, and even Ogras seemed a bit surprised by the strike.

“Consorting with the enemy in time of war has always been punished by death by the Marshall Clan,” the man said, his face not moving a muscle.

Zac's eyes drifted over to Charles, and he wondered just what kind of man he had been before the integration. Something told him that the old man wasn't one of the family members in prominent positions, but rather one of those working in the shadows.

It was a good reminder as well. The Marshall Clan wasn't very strong now when compared to Port Atwood, but that was because his force improved with tremendous speed and left everyone in the dust. But the Marshall Clan teemed with talents that would probably shine when they had managed to completely adapt to the Multiverse.

"It seems we have been too lax with our members as of late, which is our mistake," Charles continued as he started tapping away at a tablet. "I will make sure to rein in any aspiring profiteers."

"Thank you," Zac said, not wanting to push the matter any further. "Inform Henry and the others we will delay the operation a week to recuperate."

"We estimated each incursion to take five days at the minimum to assault and incorporate," Charles said with a smile. "You are ahead of schedule as it is. Slow and steady wins the race."

Zac nodded and dragged the demon out of the building before he could cause any real trouble. Having pointed his shadow spears at everyone until he got answers was bad enough, though Charles didn't seem to mind.

The two returned to Port Atwood, and Zac sent a guard to inform his squad of the break. Ogras disappeared the moment they exited the teleportation station, and Zac headed home. Kenzie was back in the cave, it seemed, so Zac immediately erected the arrays around his courtyard before sitting down with a Dao Treasure in his hand.

His gains since meeting Salvation the last time were huge, but this time, they would fight on that madman's home turf. Reports indicated that he had turned hundreds of thousands of people into puppets, and who knew what kind of power he would be able to exert. Hoarding his treasures at such a time was a waste.

He stabilized his mind before biting into the treasure, swallowing the sweet juices of the mysterious fruit. His mind was immediately whisked away, and he was once again one with the Dao.

Due to the multiple intense battles recently, he had gained no small amount of inspiration to improve his Dao. He had a pretty good idea of what to do with his Dao of Rot, Sanctuary, and Sharpness. But for this treasure, he

chose to focus on Sharpness.

Rot had improved extremely rapidly, and he needed some more time to utilize it in battle before he felt ready to push it toward the Peak mastery. Sanctuary was perhaps the one he was closest to improve due to the semi-completed vision he'd seen before Yrial ran out of power. But he still felt Sharpness was the way to go.

His inspiration came from various sources such as the extremely penetrative power of Nenotheop's strikes, the swarm of needles that Thanso used, and he even went back to the old vision of the axe-man. His last insight was centered around speed through sharpness, to cut through all obstacles. His current insight was a continuation of that, but it rather centered on penetrative power, which in a sense was the essence of sharpness.

He wanted an edge that would be able to cut through anything, even the void if needed. The boundless Dao answered, and he felt the seed housed in his axe fractal improve one step further. The mysterious effect of the Dao Treasure ended not long after, and he only had time to slightly stabilize the foundation of his improved Dao Seed before his mind returned to his body.

Zac opened his menu the moment he opened his eyes, eager to check his latest Dao improvement.

Sharpness (High): Strength +5, Dexterity +40, Intelligence +10, Wisdom +5

He had reached High mastery as expected, though Zac was a bit surprised at the attributes he'd received. Half of the thirty new points were added to Dexterity, whereas the rest got spread out over Strength, Intelligence, and Wisdom.

Still, what Zac cared about wasn't the attribute gain any longer. It was the improvement stronger Dao Seeds brought to his battle strength. He had a feeling that his improved Seed of Sharpness would massively improve his lethality against stronger opponents. As he got up to his feet, he immediately spotted Ogras sitting in a lounge outside his gates.

"I sensed the Dao through the array. You wouldn't happen to be hoarding Dao Treasures, by any chance?" Ogras said the moment Zac stepped out of the courtyard.

"That was my last one," Zac lied without missing a step.

"I'm sure it was," Ogras muttered as he followed Zac toward the private

teleporter.

There was nothing else for Zac to prepare, so he immediately activated the array to open a passage to the secret outpost that the Marshalls used to observe Salvation's actions.

They emerged in what seemed to be an abandoned cellar. The Marshalls had bought off the town from the former mayor, and it was one of the tens of thousands of small towns that managed to get a Nexus Node, but not much else. Most of these places became indefensible as the wildlife got stronger, and those who were strong enough opted to head to larger towns for safety.

According to Ogras, the number of towns would likely increase again in the future when more powerhouses emerged. A mid E-grade warrior would be enough to stand guard on a town on a D-grade world unless a particularly aggressive type of beast lived nearby. With the help of arrays, they would be able to fend off most beasts unless a beast horde formed.

This place was quite far from the Cradle of God, as Salvation was relentless in his endeavor to eradicate every living being. Staying too close would mean that one eventually would get swallowed up by his puppet tides.

So even though the area that Salvation controlled was much smaller than the Dead Zone, no one would stay in any neighboring towns, leaving a huge perimeter without a single living being. It took the two of them almost three days of travel through untamed lands before they entered the area that could be considered part of the Cradle of God.

And they only needed to travel for another thirty minutes before they spotted the first puppet.

SNEAKING INSIDE

Zac and Ogras were currently hidden within some foliage up a tree, and they had made ample preparations to obscure their presence even further. Both wore treasures that hid one's life force, just like the amulet Zac had used to trick the Zombies during the beast waves. Ogras was even continuously operating a shadow skill to hide them even further.

The two even used a portable array disk to hide from the mindless sentry, though they could only use it while they were stationary. The only way for them to be any better hidden was if they'd brought Janos as well, who could cover them in another layer of illusions, but he was occupied with the battle with the Zombies.

It might have been overkill, but Zac didn't want to take any chances with this excursion. The fact that Salvation got away still irked him, and he didn't want a repeat of that situation. Especially when he saw the man's rapid leveling speed. Salvation had long passed level 60 and had likely received another round of power-ups from his Class Quest.

But the worst thing was that Zac knew his levels likely came from killing humans rather than fighting off beasts or the invaders. Every day that lunatic remained alive, even more suffering would descend on Earth.

"How intriguing," Ogras said as his eyes were trained on the puppet.

It was one of the guard sentries they had heard about. It simply stood on a small hill with good vantage in a certain direction, its head unceasingly moving back and forth like a moving camera. Other than that, it was completely immobile.

"It slowly absorbs Cosmic Energy, but it is not cultivating. I would guess it possesses a gathering array to keep it going. That explains a lot," the

demon continued.

“What do you mean?” Zac asked with some confusion.

“It likely means that these things and the way Salvation fights are not purely a result of a unique class,” Ogras explained. “It is more likely a combination of an extremely intricate mother array that controls these things, and a class that focuses on puppetry. Rather than a mystical class that does everything.”

Zac slowly nodded in understanding. The prospect that Salvation was using tools to gain his current power was a relief since it would be pretty unsettling otherwise. He was lower level than Zac and not even on the Dao Ladder, yet he had almost fought evenly with Zac, who had Thea for support.

“Does that help us in any way?” Zac asked.

“Well, breaking the connection between a mother array and its children is much easier than breaking the connection of a skill,” Ogras said. “And it means we can substantially weaken Salvation if we find the mother array and destroy it.”

“Don’t you think it’s on his person?” Zac ventured.

“Perhaps not,” Ogras said with a shake of his head. “The more complicated the array, the larger it needs to be to house the inscriptions. There are array plates as large as planets out in the Multiverse, from what I’ve heard. More skilled inscribers can inscribe smaller fractals, but I don’t believe the Great Redeemer is skilled enough to cram an array like this into something that Salvation can carry on his body.”

“It’s not necessarily his own creation, though,” Zac countered.

“That’s fair.” Ogras nodded. “It might be something found in a Mystic Realm or on some dead powerhouse. That is a problem in itself. All the underlings of this Redeemer you’ve met are different class archetypes, making it hard to guess the situation with the boss.”

“And it seems Calrin won’t be able to dig up anything useful either,” Zac added with some wistfulness.

There was no news from his side even after two weeks of asking around, trying to buy a report on the mysterious Redeemer. The man was either very discreet or Calrin’s connections weren’t good enough to get his hands on the information.

Zac was about to move on from the invader, but another thought suddenly struck him.

“Wait, will we even be able to kill the guy?” Zac blurted out. “He might

have one or many of the Dominators guarding him.”

“I thought about that as well, but I doubt it,” Ogras said. “If our speculations are correct, I don’t think anyone would be happier than them if Salvation got himself killed. The Dominators should already be in a bad spot compared to those humans of the other world in the hunt, and if they have to contend with a direct disciple? Forget about it; they will probably throw you a banquet if you kill him.”

Zac knew that what Ogras said was based on a lot of speculation on their side, but at the same time, he felt it made some sense. There had been no cooperation between the two forces during the hunt at all, and Salvation had been left alone, even if he was weakened, since he couldn’t bring his puppet army. If the Dominators truly were concerned about his well-being, they would have sent protection just like the Medhin with their guards.

“Fair enough. But if we see any non-puppet Zhix in the area, we will need to rethink our plan,” Zac decided. “Perhaps only cutting down the tree and then make a run for it.”

“Fine, but I doubt there will be any living beings in this place if your description of that man is accurate.” Ogras shrugged. “It sounds like something has broken his mind. Either the stress of the integration or the inheritance the Great Redeemer left behind. In either case, it doesn’t sound like he is in any position to make logical choices like keeping friendlies alive.”

The puppets at the perimeter seemed to be in a passive state where they only performed a simple loop over and over, and Zac and Ogras had no problems proceeding further into the Cradle unobstructed. There were a few hidden sentries that they only spotted thanks to Ogras’ superior observation skills.

One was dug into the ground with only its head sticking out, and another one was crammed into a tree. It proved that the former humans were truly only seen as tools and that Salvation had them in abundance if he could use them frivolously like this. They had spotted over a dozen sentries in the past hour, and they had only traversed an extremely small part of the Cradle of God.

The total number of sentries must count in the thousands, and Zac could understand why there was so little information about what was going on inside. Very few would be able to enter this place unnoticed, and fewer still were willing to take the risk. But to Ogras, all these traps were like a child’s

game, and he unhurriedly guided the duo through the outer perimeter.

“So where are these trees of yours?” Ogras asked, prompting Zac to take out a tablet and open up a map.

“According to the guesses of the Marshall Clan, they should be roughly another five hours’ travel due northeast,” Zac said with some hesitation. “But if they are five hundred meters tall, we should be able to see them much earlier.”

His words turned prophetic ninety minutes later when they trekked up a small hill under the guise of some shrubbery. They wanted to get a better vantage to check for any threats, as they were starting to get pretty far into the core of Salvation’s zone.

But after the outer perimeter of silver scouts, the zone was completely devoid of both living beings and puppets, making the two believe that Salvation kept a large chunk of his guards close at hand. What they did spot, however, was the gargantuan trees that towered into the sky in the distance. Some even reached above the clouds, a testament to how huge they had become.

Even though Zac was unable to properly gauge their height, he had a strong suspicion that at least a few of them were large enough for him to complete his quest, and he motioned to Ogras to lead the way.

It took them a few more hours before they reached the forest, and even Ogras couldn’t stop himself from being impressed by the majesty of the redwoods. Zac had never gone to see them before the integration, but he had seen the pictures on the internet.

The forest they walked through now was far beyond what he had seen in pictures, as the trees had grown not only in height but also in width. Many reached more than twenty meters in diameter, and it was to the point that Zac started to hesitate whether he would even be able to fell one of these monstrosities in one swing.

He even started to feel a twang of guilt when he saw these majestic trees reaching up toward the skies, but he hardened his heart as they looked for a target. This was unfortunately not a time for environmental conservation. He truly needed the power-up to fight the stronger incursions. Otherwise, the losses on his side would turn disastrous.

Finally, the two found a tree that fit the bill. In contrast to the other trees, it seemed to carry some sort of fungal infection, and cutting it down might even protect the forest from the spread of disease. Zac also had Ogras climb

the thing with a fifty-meter rope to make sure it was tall enough, and the crown clocked in at over 540 meters. It was essentially a skyscraper from its dimensions.

“When this tree goes down, the sound will probably be enough to alert the whole country,” Ogras commented as he knocked on the trunk that was larger than a basketball court. “It must weigh an insane amount. You might even cause an earthquake.”

“If I can even bring this thing down,” Zac muttered as he looked at it with some hesitation.

As he had grown stronger, he was able to create a longer and longer edge with **[Chop]**, though it was still unstable above ten meters in length. Now he needed to at least triple that number and keep it active long enough to swipe through the whole tree.

But nothing ventured, nothing gained.

“Get ready to run,” Zac only said as he took out **[Verun’s Bite]** and walked up next to the trunk.

The edge from **[Chop]** grew with rapid speed until the edge reached ten meters, where Zac momentarily stopped its growth. He needed to instantly push it to thirty-five meters or so from there, and do it as quickly as possible.

Zac simply decided to push his energy control to the limit and completely flood the fractal on his hand with as much energy as he possibly could. He found that his training with the mental puzzle helped somewhat, as it also made the control of his Cosmic Energy smoother. To stabilize the skill further, he imbued it with his recently improved Dao Seed as well.

The edge gained a silver sheen from his Late-stage Dao of Sharpness as it stretched out from his axe until it started to gain ridiculous proportions. He tried to maintain a semblance of control of the fractal edge as long as possible as it grew, but he felt it was starting to become unstable the moment he passed fifteen meters.

He did everything he could to have the Cosmic Energy retain its shape until it finally reached the necessary length. His axe was already moving with fluid motion the moment the fractal edge became long enough, but he started to frown as the edge tore through the wood.

There was significant resistance to his swing, even with his E-grade axe and Dao of Sharpness combining to make an extremely strong attack. The properties of the wood had clearly been strengthened by the Cosmic Energy to allow it to support its own massive weight.

Zac's muscles strained to push through the tree as his mind started to become dizzy from the effort of maintaining the shape of the edge. But just as it was about to pass through the other side, it finally fizzled, leaving a small piece still intact. Disappointment started to flood Zac's mind, but his hopes reignited when the tree started to creak ominously.

"Did your quest complete?" Ogras asked, and Zac opened his status screen as the two started to create some distance from the redwood.

The attack had contained enough momentum to make the tree swing, and the movements were in turn enough to break off the last piece of the trunk.

A thunderous explosion that caused the ground to shake spread out in the area the moment the tree slammed into the ground, taking two smaller redwoods with it. Zac and Ogras were thrown tens of meters in the air, wildly flailing until Ogras shot a shadow spear into a nearby tree with one hand and grabbed Zac with the other.

It was as though a hurricane went through the forest, and the remaining trees wildly swayed back and forth, making Zac fear that he had started off a chain reaction with his attack. But the area soon calmed down, allowing Zac to breathe out in relief and open his status screen and enter the skill tab.

Deforestation – Proficiency: Early. Their army is the forest, and you are the Hatchetman. Upgradeable.

The swing had counted as a success, and Zac breathed out in relief. He realized the quest had told him to cut the tree down in one swing rather than to completely cut through it, so that the edge didn't go all the way through wasn't the end of the world. The quest had likely finished the moment the tree slammed into the ground, but the shockwave had made Zac miss the fact that he'd gained another fractal on his right bicep.

As he read the description, he was reminded of the flavor text of his Hatchetman class. It had said something very familiar, and it almost felt like **[Deforestation]** was the signature skill of his class. Zac really wanted to try it out as soon as possible, but another change made him stop in his tracks.

[Chop], the first attack skill that he had obtained, had finally evolved from Late to Peak mastery, becoming the first skill to do so. His skills hadn't improved as quickly as his Daos, and he was quite far away from pushing them all to the peak. He briefly wondered what he could do to push his skills further, but a prod from Ogras brought him out of his musings.

“Holy crap,” Ogras muttered, losing some of his trademark calm as he pointed toward a field in the distance.

Any thoughts of skills were thrown out of Zac’s head as he visibly paled from what he saw. Holy crap was exactly what Zac felt when he saw the ocean of silver puppets that swarmed toward their position.

And above the puppets, hundreds of silver rivers streaked across the sky, forming a beautiful pattern that spoke of impending doom.

AGAINST THE CLOCK

Worry marred Zac's face as he looked out at the ocean of silver puppets. He already knew the force that Salvation could summon was huge, but it was still intimidating to see such a lineup in person. The endless silver rivers looked like scars in the sky, and the combined aura of the puppets on the ground was extremely daunting.

"This kind of power should not be available to an F-grade warrior," Ogras muttered, his face slightly pale. "There must be some kind of drawback."

"I didn't sense any weakness last time, apart from the fact that his actual body is pretty weak. He needed to use treasures and his puppets to stay safe. If I can get to him, I'd be able to kill him in one swing," Zac said, mustering up some courage.

He was still not happy about the situation, as the arrival of the army was too fast. The forest they were in was an hour away from the central city that Salvation had occupied, a chunk of former Los Angeles. It should have taken the puppets even longer to get here, meaning that Salvation had set out toward this place hours ago.

Had they already been spotted?

"Well, so much for a sneak attack," Ogras muttered, echoing Zac's thoughts. "So what do you want to do?"

Zac frowned as he kept looking at the incoming horde through a pair of binoculars. Every single one was a puppet, which in a sense was good news. It meant no one had allied with Salvation, not even the Zhix under the control of the Dominators. He did spot a few of the insectoids, but they had invariably been turned into puppets, just like the humans and Ishiate.

However, there were simply so many of them. What if he summoned

another face in the sky, except that this one was a hundred times larger? Zac doubted that even he would survive such a strike. But he suddenly froze when he spotted the familiar form walking among the puppets.

Salvation still looked like an insane hobo, but Zac could spot even from this great distance that he had noticeably aged. Silver streaks ran through his oily hair and wild beard, and his face was marred with wrinkles. Had he been forced to utilize life force in battle recently? If so, he might be weakened, making this an opportune moment to strike.

The mad prophet had also arrived at a similar solution to his amputation as Ogras. The hand that Zac had managed to chop off at the last minute in the hunt had been replaced by the metallic liquid that ran all the way up to his shoulder. Suddenly, Salvation's head snapped straight toward their direction as Zac scouted him out, and it felt as though he looked straight into his eyes. Zac didn't know why, but he was sure that it wasn't just a feeling, but rather the truth.

They had already been spotted.

"Let's head down," Zac said. "Perhaps we can surprise attack him while speaking. He's the kind of lunatic who likes an audience."

Ogras nodded, and the two jumped down from their position up the tree. Just two minutes later, they stood in front of the enormous army of puppets, with Salvation having walked toward the front. The world had almost turned monochromatic from the rivers obscuring the suns, but Zac's whole attention was on the lunatic wearing the dirty sheets.

"Like a moth to flames, the spirit longs for salvation," Salvation said as he stepped forward, with ten silver rivers circulating him for protection. It looked like he wasn't taking any chances with Zac within axing distance. "Are you ready to join the Great Undertaking?"

"Unfortunately not. I'm here to finish what I started back in the hunt. Why don't you call your Zhix allies here as well?" Zac said, making a gambit that Salvation was too crazy to realize he was digging for information.

"Those three are but tools of the Great Lord," Salvation said with some disdain. "They lack the piety and the dedication to the cause and only serve a purpose until they've led the Great Lord here. They know better than to encroach on the holy land."

Zac felt some relief when hearing that, as it didn't look like Salvation was lying. His mind was consumed with his insane crusade, and things such as subterfuge were beyond him at the moment.

“This one is even loopier than I thought,” Ogras muttered with some interest as he studied Salvation like one would a rabid animal.

“Do not worry, horned one. Not even the scions of Lucifer are beyond redemption,” Salvation said, throwing Ogras a pitying glance.

“Oh? You know of Lord Lucifer?” Ogras said with surprise, making Zac look over with some shock.

“What?” Ogras asked with some confusion after seeing Zac’s look. “Lucifer is one of the most powerful demons around, a true hero. This whole region should know of his name.”

Zac wanted to ask a dozen follow-up questions to that, but there were far more pressing matters at hand.

“How did you find us?” Zac asked of the grimy man with some resignation.

“The Lord hears all, sees all, is all.” Salvation lifted his eyes far into the air. “How can I not sense your Sapience, your suffering. Let me free you.”

That was all the time Salvation was willing to waste on the conversation as five rivers descended from the skies to charge at the two. Meanwhile, an enormous change took place with the rest of the rivers. They started to change and form fractals in the sky, creating a circle of inscriptions.

A dozen shadow spears suddenly appeared around Salvation that tried to skewer him the moment they rose out of the ground. But it was as though the swirling rivers around their enemy had a mind of their own as they blocked all the strikes before Salvation himself even had time to react.

Large clouds of dissipated silver rose into the air, and a few dozen of the innumerable spare puppets immediately liquefied and joined the defensive perimeter around their master. Ogras tsked in disappointment as he looked up at the change to the liquefied puppets, his spear already having appeared in his hand.

“They seem to be forming an array,” Ogras muttered. “We should probably disrupt it.”

“Can you handle it?” Zac asked. “I’ll try to go straight toward the source.”

“Fine, you’re better suited for charging straight into it like a bull anyway,” Ogras agreed as the two huge shadow wings sprouted on his back.

Zac simply nodded and exploded into motion with **[Loamwalker]** pushing him straight toward Salvation himself. As he pushed forward, he charged up his new and improved **[Chop]** to tackle the protective layers

surrounding the puppeteer.

Cosmic Energy effortlessly entered the fractal as usual, but when he infused the fractal with his energy, Zac noticed a startling change. For one, he infused over ten times as much energy as usual before the blade assembled, but that wasn't all. As the fractal edge materialized, he also formed a mental connection he had never felt before.

Suddenly, it was as though the large five-meter edge was a part of his body, and with a simple mental command, it detached from its position in front of his axe. However, it didn't shoot off toward Salvation and his metallic rivers but rather started to hover around him like a large scythe of death.

Zac tried to summon another edge, but this time, there was no mental connection forming, but just another standard blade that required the regular amount of energy. It looked like the change in his skill was that he received one special edge, while the others remained the same.

Unfortunately, this wasn't the time to experiment with where the limits of his new addition lay, and Zac refocused on the battle instead. He created another five blades and launched them in quick order toward Salvation, as the special edge stayed within like a bodyguard.

Each blade was imbued with the improved Dao of Sharpness, and they pushed Salvation's defenses to their limits. Each edge completely ripped a river to shreds before dissipating, forcing over a hundred puppets to liquefy. Only around a month had passed since the two had fought last time, but Zac had not only improved his Daos considerably but also his weapon.

The rabid fanaticism in Salvation's eyes was briefly doused as fear flashed on his face for the first time. Zac was almost upon him, but this time, Salvation wasn't willing to confront him head-on. The ten rivers surrounding him swallowed him up before they scattered in different directions, making Zac unable to tell where he had gone.

Another fifty rivers were created from the puppets, and as they twirled and intertwined, it was completely impossible to tell which was which. The only relief was that he hadn't launched **[Nature's Punishment]** immediately in an attempt to destroy Salvation, as he had gotten even better at staying hidden. He would have been forced to waste the huge hand on killing a few hundred puppets, wasting its massive power and energy consumption.

Soon the rivers started to shoot toward Zac, and he rapidly started to destroy them by launching his blades at them, but there was no end in sight.

He soon realized that he would need to infuse the blade with the Dao of Sharpness to completely destroy a river, but his mind would become overtaxed before he managed to launch enough attacks with **[Chop]**. Salvation had simply brought too many puppets.

“Shit! What are these things made of?” a frustrated shout could be heard from above as Zac hesitated about what to do next, and he looked up to see Ogras desperately trying to destroy the enormous fractals that had already fully formed.

The rivers in the sky had turned into a long string of fractals in just seconds, and they formed an enormous circle in the sky. Its diameter was at least a square kilometer, and it encompassed the whole battlefield and the puppet army. So far, he couldn't sense them doing anything, but even he could sense the massive amounts of Cosmic Energy they started to absorb.

Zac frowned and launched a handful of Dao-infused blades toward the fractals as well, but they were extremely sturdy. The strikes did chip them down somewhat, but a handful of the tens of thousands of puppets immediately reinforced them. Ogras swooped down toward him with some hesitation on his face when he saw that the battle below had stalled as well.

“It has truly formed an array,” Ogras said. “This guy is just too weird. We might be better if we exit the encirclement before we consider our next step.”

“You have entered the Holy Kingdom; it is time for you to join the unity. Through pain comes clarity.” The voice of Salvation echoed across the field, though it was impossible to pinpoint its source.

A foreboding feeling crept into Zac's heart as he shot Ogras a glance. He started to feel that they had been a bit overconfident in confronting this madman. They should probably have backed off when they saw the huge resources that Salvation had expended to confront them, but he had been too anxious to finish the fight, emboldened by his recent power-ups.

The demon imperceptibly nodded, and the two immediately disappeared from their spot, rushing out of the encirclement. But the moment they were about to cross the threshold, it was as though Zac slammed into a wall, and the rebound threw him over ten meters back.

A shockwave made Zac's robe flutter immediately afterward as Ogras launched a beam of shadows at the invisible shield. But there was not even a shudder, making the ominous feeling in Zac's heart worse.

“There's no way we will break this thing in the short run,” Ogras muttered.

“What do we do?” Zac asked, pushing down any panic that threatened to rise to the surface. He hated feeling like a trapped animal.

“Everything should be controlled by that man. We kill him and the rest of it should sort itself out,” Ogras hesitantly said. “Judging by how the fractals are absorbing energy, it will take a few minutes for them to charge whatever they’re supposed to do.”

“I have no method of locating him, though,” Zac said with a grimace. “He can seamlessly move about the puppets. He might even turn himself into that liquid from what I can tell.”

“Well, all the puppets are within the array, so he should be as well, no?” Ogras said. “So if we destroy all the puppets, we should be able to find him. If we still can’t find him, we will at least have destroyed what allows the runes to regenerate, which might allow us to destroy them.”

Zac thoughtfully nodded in agreement. It was far better than just standing around, even if he still was a bit unwilling to destroy these poor people who had become victims to Salvation.

“But we’re against the clock here, so no holding back,” Ogras added.

“I think I have just the thing,” Zac said, tightening the grip on his axe.

Zac once again started to run toward where he came from. But this time, his aim wasn’t to directly kill Salvation, but rather to cause widespread mayhem.

It was time to unleash [**Deforestation**].

DEFORESTATION

Zac knew time was running out as he rushed toward the sea of puppets. They had no idea what the enormous array in the sky would do, but he couldn't imagine it being anything good. Since Salvation had said it was time to join the unity, it might mean that both he and Ogras would be turned into puppets the moment the fractals finished charging up.

He also knew that **[Chop]** wouldn't cut it, even with its recent upgrade. There was a limit to how many puppets he could destroy per swing, and the number was too low to rip apart the endless army in front of him. It was like the mission he'd received to kill enough Zombies in ten minutes. This time, he needed to maintain a killing speed that was at least ten times higher.

The function of the special blade from **[Chop]** was still unclear, as it still hovered around him. However, Zac noted that it had barely cost any Cosmic Energy to maintain since he'd formed it, meaning it might be possible to keep a permanent edge on hand. He needed to explore ways to manipulate it, though, as traveling with a five-meter cutter swirling around him would be pretty inconvenient.

He instead put his hopes on his newly acquired skill, **[Deforestation]**. He'd received no explanation of how the skill worked when he got it, and there were rather only a few names that entered his mind. But its description indicated it was used as an army-killing attack.

So it was with fervent hope he started to flood the fractal on his bicep with Cosmic Energy as he ran toward the puppets. The fractal immediately activated, and he finally received a burst of insight, making him understand how to properly utilize the skill. And it was just in time with him arriving in front of the Silver Guards.

“Axe of Felling,” Zac muttered as his arm started to perform a wide horizontal swing.

It felt as though he was pushing through a viscous liquid, but to Zac’s massive pool of Strength, it was only a minor inconvenience, some additional strain on his body. The energies in the surroundings started to churn while a large chunk of Zac’s own Cosmic Energy also was dragged out of his body to feed the attack.

[Verun’s Bite] only cleaved air as Zac finished his motion, but the swing was only there to summon the real strike. The true effect of **[Deforestation]** materialized the moment Zac finished his strike, and it moved to repeat Zac’s own swing.

It was a forester’s hatchet, almost a bit reminiscent of his first weapon, his trusty hatchet that had unfortunately turned to scrap in his battle with Vul. The summoned weapon had a somewhat small head for its very long wooden handle, and if it weren’t for two details, one could have thought it was a normal hatchet from Earth.

The first oddity was its size. The hatchet was well over ten meters long, with its head being larger than Zac himself. The second clue to its origin was the fractals that adorned it. There were two lines of inscriptions, one running along the back of the long handle, and the other along its edge.

The fractals along the chestnut-colored handle emitted a sense of imperviousness and fortitude, making it seem the axe would be able to handle any amount of strain without snapping. The ones on the edge gave off a completely different feeling, and it was one that Zac was familiar with. It was sharpness, the ability to cut through anything.

The fractals’ functions might be the standard set that a Multiverse hatchet would contain, but they were extremely different from the fractals on a weapon that one might pick up in the System’s General Stores. They contained a boundless intricacy in their simplicity, and it was clear they contained truths that were well beyond Zac’s current understanding of the Dao.

Zac tried to imbue the enormous axe with his Dao of Sharpness, but his mental energy was actually rebuffed when he tried to infuse it. Zac knew he might be imagining things, but he almost felt as though the huge axe disdained his Seed of Sharpness, not wanting to be sullied by such a lowly insight into the Dao.

Zac quickly tried a few other Daos, but the result was the same. The axe

finished its trajectory without getting imbued at all, and it was an exact copy of Zac's own swing. The attack was simple and unadorned, but the effect was anything but. Zac first thought the attack was a dud, but soon one puppet after another started to fall apart, bisected in the middle by a clean cut.

First it was one, then two, then hundreds of puppets that fell into pieces before turning into vapor. The silver rivers weren't faring any better, as they shattered one after another as well from the forester's axe. The attack kept moving outward, and the battlefield was soon obscured in a dense silver mist from the thousands of puppets that were destroyed in an instant.

Zac estimated that over twenty thousand puppets had been destroyed by that one massive swing, but he knew that the effect of **[Deforestation]** wasn't over. It was not a single-use skill, but rather a skill that ramped up, as long as his body could take it.

Zac hurried forward through the shrouded battlefield so that he could unleash the follow-up swing as close as possible to the remaining puppets. He shot a glance at Ogras while he rushed forward to see that the demon had unleashed his largest sea of shadows yet.

A large sector of the battlefield was shrouded in utter darkness, and puppets were swallowed and destroyed by the dozens every second. Ogras himself was floating above the shrouded field like a God of darkness, shooting concentrated shadows to destroy any silver rivers that tried to flee his sphere of influence.

It was starting to become clear that Salvation possessed some rationality at least, and it looked like he was trying to stall out the battle. His puppets had actually been trapped within the barrier as well, but there was still a lot of room for them to move about.

The mad prophet wasn't trying to gather his forces to charge at the two, but he rather seemed content to sacrifice parts of his army while the runes in the sky kept gathering energy. Zac couldn't be sure, but from the power they were starting to emit, he feared that they had even less time than they had hoped.

Zac reached the edge of where the attack of **[Axe of Felling]** reached, and he once again charged up the fractal representing **[Deforestation]**.

"Infernal Axe," Zac growled, and suddenly, it felt as though he were carrying a mountain on his shoulders when he tried to repeat the swing.

His whole body strained to the max as he desperately pushed his axe forward, and once again, an enormous axe materialized in front of him when

he completed the swing. This time, it was even more massive, with an edge at least twice the size of the **[Axe of Felling]**.

The axe also looked completely different. The last one was a simple axe apart from the line of fractals, whereas this one was clearly meant for war. The head was larger with a long curved edge looking like molten stone, and it emitted an aura of fiery annihilation. Its handle seemed to be created from a burnt-out trunk of some unknown tree, and scorch marks formed dozens of fractals in a seemingly random pattern along the handle.

It was a forest fire turned into a weapon, and as the enormous axe swung, an inferno rippled outward in a massive wave of destruction. This attack was nothing like the nondescript killing of the first swing. It looked like a red tsunami that pushed outward toward the puppets, swallowing anything it reached.

The puppets were not only burnt when the wave consumed them, but the flames actually contained an extremely sharp cutting power. The flames somehow chopped the Silver Guards into tens of pieces that were soon turned into cinders before the wave passed on. They didn't even get the chance to form the silver mist this time, as only burnt chunks were left behind.

Salvation tried to move his remaining puppets and rivers away from the firestorm, but the attack was way too fast for even the more agile silver rivers. The wave kept growing and growing in a massive conflagration, and soon the attack had passed hundreds of meters, leaving nothing but scorched earth in its wake.

Zac had fallen down on his knees after releasing the attack, panting with exhaustion. After the two attacks, he had a pretty decent idea of the requirements for the first two swings. The Axe of Felling required somewhere around 500 Strength to launch, whereas the second one required 750.

He guessed that normally only the first swing was meant to be used in the F-grade unless perhaps someone managed to reach the required Strength for the second with the help of **[Hatchetman's Rage]**. But thanks to his titles, his effective Strength just about passed 800, allowing him to launch the second swing, though not effortlessly.

But Zac knew that still wasn't the end. There was one more axe one could summon with **[Deforestation]**.

Zac hesitantly looked at the remaining puppets and rivers. His two first swings had killed off roughly a third of the puppets, where the second swing

had destroyed over a hundred thousand puppets alone. The Shadow Ocean that Ogras had summoned would be able to handle a quarter of the original number as well before the time ran out. But that still left almost half of the puppets.

In a perfect world, he would repeat the swing of the Infernal Axe a couple of times to rip apart the rest of the puppets, but he realized that this attack couldn't be used repeatedly. The fractal on his arm had dimmed by a large degree, with only a third still being illuminated by a mysterious power.

Zac realized that the attack was a bit like his upgraded axe. The powerful skill had charges, and it needed to restore its energies before it could be used again. Perhaps that was for the best, as Zac felt how wrung out his body was after using the second strike, even with his extreme physique.

That meant he would either need to try to summon the third axe or cancel the attack and try to destroy the rest of the puppets some other way. Salvation still doggedly refused to leave his position within one of the rivers, so using **[Nature's Punishment]** to finish him off was impossible.

Meanwhile, he didn't feel that **[Chop]** was up to the task of destroying the well over hundred thousand remaining puppets in short order, leaving the final axe as his only solution. The problem was that Zac wasn't sure he would be able to withstand the backlash from trying to force the ultimate attack of **[Deforestation]**.

However, they were running out of options, and Zac could only make a gambit on his oddly durable body. The air around him twisted from a massive surge of power as he activated **[Hatchetman's Rage]** to push his effective Strength to over 1,000 points.

The mental effects of the skill were especially poignant with the added effect of the **[Splinter of Oblivion]** bleeding into his mind since the battle started, and Zac forcibly had to restrain himself from actually trying to bite a puppet to death the moment he reached the defending line of Silver Guards once again.

"Desolation," Zac wheezed with red-tinted eyes as almost all of his remaining Cosmic Energy was sucked dry in the blink of an eye.

Zac started to swing his axe to launch the final axe, which was called **[Desolation]**. But he only managed to swing the axe halfway before he was pushed to his knees from insane pressure, one that didn't only affect his body but even his soul. He felt a deep unwillingness to give in as madness took control of his mind, and he used everything he had to push the axe forward.

His muscles tore as blood started to run from his nose and ears, but it actually seemed to work, as the outline of an enormous axe started to form. But its true shape couldn't even be discerned before a loud snap echoed across the battlefield, and the axe immediately fractured.

The sound came from multiple bones in Zac's arm shattering due to the overwhelming pressure. His strength wasn't enough, even with **[Hatchetman's Rage]** activated. Zac had hoped that the requirement for the third axe was 1,000 Strength, but that clearly wasn't it, as he hadn't even been close to finishing the swing before his body broke down and his mind was damaged.

But surprisingly, the attack wasn't a complete failure. As the indistinct outline of the axe fractured, it turned into a hazy gray mist that rushed out toward the puppets. The mist was pretty sparse, and only a small part of the remaining Silver Guards was affected, but the result was still astounding.

Anything the anthracite mist touched started to crumble, and in just seconds, the affected guards had turned into nothingness. There were no marks, no remains, nothing. Just complete and total annihilation. Zac's eyes widened in shock as he looked upon the destruction as he lay immobile on the ground, wondering just how strong the fully finished strike would be.

Unfortunately, the mist was only enough to destroy another ten thousand puppets. But sometimes a little bit of luck was all that was needed to turn a battle around.

A silver river fragmented due to an errant gust of the deadly mist, and a wretched Salvation was thrown out with a pained wail, a silver shield shattering around him. Even the silver arm he had created for himself broke down, turning into blackened motes that dissipated.

Only Salvation himself seemed fine, with his puppets sacrificing themselves to protect him from the effects of **[Desolation]**. Madness and fear marred the man's face as he looked at Zac with horror, and Zac growled in response as he tried to get back on his feet.

"DESCENT!" Salvation screamed in panic, and the remaining tens of thousands of puppets broke down simultaneously, rapidly forming a sinister cloud beyond anything Zac had seen before.

EXPLOSIONS

Zac's eyes widened in alarm because the scene was the same as when Salvation had summoned the enormous head in the sky during the hunt, only on a far grander scale. If this attack was allowed to complete its buildup, the face would at least be ten times the size of the last time.

Something needed to be done, but his limbs didn't respond to his commands. His last attack had completely overtaxed his body, and apart from the broken bones in his arm and shoulder, he felt he had ripped most of his muscles as well.

He still had some remaining Cosmic Energy in his system, but he couldn't even stand up at the moment, let alone launch an attack to stop Salvation from bringing the equivalent of a comet down on their heads. He only saw one possibility to turn the tides.

[Beauty Yrial's Great Transformation Skill] activated around his core, and his battered body was immediately flooded with Miasma. Zac's vision blurred, and a sense of weakness immediately spread through his body. The effect was even worse as **[Hatchetman's Rage]** was forcibly canceled before its time limit, and it looked like switching class was not a viable method to avoid the backlash from activating the buffing skill.

The transformation would take less than ten seconds, but he started to despair as he realized he wouldn't make it in time. An enormous silver river formed in the clouds above, and it quickly moved down to swallow Salvation's exposed body.

Blood suddenly spurted out of the mad prophet's mouth as a shadowy lance erupted from his chest. He looked down with bafflement as even more lances skewered him, making him lose blood like a sieve.

It was Ogras, who had somehow teleported into Salvation's own shadow to attack him before he had time to get back into the protection of his silver rivers. It looked like Ogras had been patiently waiting like a hunter for Salvation to appear, to get a shot at assassinating him.

A wet cough escaped Salvation's mouth as he slowly turned his head toward Ogras. The demon was just about to slice off his head, when his eyes widened in alarm. The golden fractal on Salvation's forehead lit up with blinding light, and the demon fell back as though he was grievously wounded.

"So it is my time to join the unity," Salvation rasped as he rapidly started to age. "But redemption comes to all. I will be accompanied by thousands, my last gift to the Great Lord."

Ogras suddenly started to scream as though he were being ripped apart as he was bathed in golden light. He desperately tried to move away, but it looked like his body didn't respond to his actions.

"Horned one, join me in ete—" Salvation said, but was forcibly interrupted as a huge spiked shield slammed into him with the force of a ballistic missile.

Half of Salvation's body, including most of his head, was destroyed, instantly killing him. The golden fractal lost its source of energy when the grimy priest lost his remaining life force. Ogras soon calmed down, but he was still on his knees, panting from whatever he had experienced.

It was Zac who had finally finished his transformation but had found himself unable to move even in his Draugr form. Luckily, one of his arms was still mostly intact apart from a few pulled muscles. He had forced it full of Miasma with **[Unholy Strike]** and hurled his huge shield at Salvation since he was afraid he'd miss if he threw his axe with his left arm.

Zac was filled with new energy after the shield hit home, confirming that Salvation had truly died from the attack. But the energy was extremely lacking for how taxing the battle was since Salvation was only level 62. It was enough to push his level to 54 and some ways toward the next level, but nothing more than that.

He arduously got to a sitting position as he sardonically wondered what his opponent would think if he ever got killed in battle. Would he be shocked at the minuscule amount of energy compared to the strength that Zac exhibited? But he was soon dragged out of his musings from the rumblings of the sky.

The silver clouds had stopped condensing with Salvation's death, but they

hadn't dissipated. The enormous amount of energies they contained rapidly became more and more chaotic, and alarm bells were starting to go off in Zac's mind.

"Good job, though I believe kill stealing is my job." A weak voice came from his side as Ogras appeared with the shield gripped in a shadow tentacle.

The demon was as pale as a sheet, and tear streaks were running down his face. Zac wondered just what the demon had experienced inside that golden light to look like that. After glancing over at the demon's original position, Zac saw that the body of Salvation was gone, likely snatched up by Ogras as he rushed over here.

"Unfortunately, we don't seem to be out of harm's way," the demon continued. "The arrays have stopped gathering energy, but they are still active. My soul is wounded, and I'm out of energy. Are you able to destroy a rune to let us out of here?"

Zac sighed and shook his head.

"I don't have a lot of offensive skills in this class. The only thing is that throw," Zac explained.

Ogras only groaned and started to desperately rip up huge chunks of the scorched ground beneath them.

"Then get to digging," Ogras said. "We have twenty seconds at best before the energies in those clouds above us rip this area into pieces."

Zac's brows rose in realization, and he punched a deep hole with his working arm, ignoring the pain from using his torn muscles. It only took them ten seconds to dig over twenty meters down in the ground, after which they covered themselves with layers of soil.

However, they weren't done with just that, as Zac summoned **[Immutable Bulwark]** to form a thick shield above them, and he immediately imbued it with the Seed of Hardness. Ogras still wasn't satisfied as one array disk after another appeared, along with a few other defensive treasures that Zac had never seen before.

"Treasures are no good for you dead," Ogras muttered, though he seemed a bit pained as he clutched his items.

Zac was about to respond, but a shockwave that almost knocked him unconscious slammed into them, even with the multiple layers of defense. The next moment, the world turned white as a massive explosion erupted that drowned out everything else.

Miasma was being drained at an astonishing rate as torrential forces

continuously slammed into his shield, and three-quarters of his death-attuned energy was gone in just a few seconds. Finally, he was forced to remove the shield while shouting a warning to Ogras, letting the defensive treasures take the brunt of the attack.

The shimmering layers of shields started shattering at a rapid pace from the unceasing onslaught, and Zac was starting to wonder if he would have to resummon his shield and push it until he ran out of Miasma. But as suddenly as the force erupted, it also disappeared, and calm once again returned to the area.

Zac and Ogras found themselves at the bottom of an enormous crater, and the two gawked as they looked around. There was simply nothing there apart from the enormous hole that was at least fifty meters deep.

There was a clean line of demarcation in a circle where the edge of the array once was, as it seemed the blast had been contained and pushed downward, at least in the beginning of the eruption. The large fractals in the sky were all gone, clearly unable to hold against the massive forces that had been unleashed.

The two were both in pretty bad shape, but they knew it was risky to stay here. The Dominators hadn't appeared in the fight, just like they had hoped, but the massive discharge just now could likely be seen from outside Salvation's area of control. So they arduously made their way out of the crater, only to see another scene of utter desolation.

Half the forest they'd come from had been toppled, and anything aboveground had been ripped to shreds from the blast after the array containment failed. Zac shook his head in wonderment, feeling as though he had survived staying in the epicenter of a nuclear explosion, mostly through his own power.

The world of Cosmic Energy was both terrifying and wondrous.

Thomas walked through the streets of New Washington, or what remained of them. A somber expression marred his tired face as he looked at the scene of devastation.

"Do we have a tally yet?" Thomas sighed, turning to his aide, who walked alongside him with one of her arms in a cast.

“The cleanup process is still underway, but we fear that up to twenty percent of the population died from the explosion, and many more are wounded. The commercial and residential districts were particularly badly hit,” she said with a downcast face.

“Do we know how Salvation managed to smuggle so many of his puppets into our sewer system?” Thomas growled, an ember of fury burning in his chest.

“We still have no idea; the routes were completely destroyed from the explosion, making it impossible to map. One theory is that he found an abandoned sewage outlet that ran out of the town that provided him ingress,” she said, though it was clear she did not believe in this theory.

“What do you believe?” Thomas sighed, though he had a good idea of what she was thinking.

“Wasn’t Salvation allied with... *them*?” the aide said with a low voice, avoiding eye contact with Thomas.

Thomas sighed again as they returned to his office after making the rounds.

“They served the same master, but from how we understand it, they belonged to rival camps. I reached out to our contact earlier, and they fervently denied any involvement in this terrorist attack. Truthfully, I believe them, if only because this insanity is against their goals as well,” Thomas said with a tired voice.

He knew what his aide thought of those monsters and the path of no return they had embarked upon. But they were out of options and time was running out. Perhaps that man would be able to defeat the Dominators given enough time, but their Lord was on his way. He knew that fighting against him was futile, like ants trying to destroy an elephant.

It was time to salvage what could be saved. He knew that only a small fraction of humanity would survive the arrival of the Great Redeemer with his plan, but that was better than the whole world getting harvested. If he needed to sell his soul to save at least a small part of humanity, so be it.

But he hadn’t completely given up. As long as he had two hands, he would do everything in his power to turn the tide.

“Has there been any news from our other project?” Thomas asked, and the aide immediately took out a few documents, knowing what he was referring to.

“The spies we caught had limited knowledge about the movements of the

Church, but we have finally managed to locate one of the four entrances that the Church of Everlasting Dao control. We are amassing our armies to strike that outpost as we speak,” she said.

“Any new intelligence?” Thomas probed, as he had been too occupied with the Zombie threat as of late to be up to date on the activities of this clandestine project.

“We have confirmed from multiple sources that they all lead to the same Mystic Realm and that it is an enormous structure that would likely be able to house millions of people. But it is already populated by multiple indigenous forces, and even the core members of the Church have found themselves in pitched battles without making much headway,” she read from the reports.

“Have you found out what’s inside that’s so important that they ignore all the resources of Earth?” Thomas asked with a sharp look in her direction.

“The infiltrators have no idea; even they seemed pretty shocked at the resources their High Vicar spends at conquering that place,” she said. “And the main branch of their Church seems to have spent a huge sum to provide reinforcements to help in their efforts.”

“Do we have the strength to conquer the base?” Thomas asked next.

“It is guarded by multiple E-grade warriors, though they are still somewhat limited by the restrictions. We will need to expend both plenty of lives and a sizeable portion of our old-world weaponry to seize it, according to our generals,” she said, waiting for instructions.

Thomas nodded in thought. In fact, he knew more about the situation inside those portals than his aide. Only a handful of people from the government knew the true reason why the Church so desperately wanted to seize the enormous facility. It had cost them a shocking amount of lives and resources to receive that snippet of information since it had required them to capture one of the Church’s bishops.

It was the key to not only surviving this calamity but actually making huge strides forward. Their alliance with those lunatics under the Great Redeemer was just the backup plan to save some of their people if things didn’t work out. It wouldn’t be necessary if they attained their goals with this Mystic Realm.

“It is the gateway that might lead to the salvation of humanity. Spare no expense; we need to seize that entrance.”

DAO FUNNEL

“He’s dead?” Void’s Disciple said with a small frown without looking up from the scriptures in front of him.

Inevitability hesitantly nodded and muttered a confirmation, unable to read their leader’s mood as usual.

“The fulcrum teamed up with the leader of the demonkin invaders to assault Salvation. The large explosions at the end appear to be the collective detonation of all his Silver Guards,” Inevitability said.

“How did he manage to move so many of his puppets to all those towns unnoticed?” Void’s Disciple casually asked, but fear immediately gripped Inevitability’s heart. “At least a million people have died, robbing our Lord of his harvest.”

“That... It was me and Harbinger,” Inevitability admitted, her heart rapidly beating.

“Explain,” Void said, looking up from the ancient texts for the first time since Inevitability had entered his cultivation chamber at the bottom of the expansive hive.

Void’s Disciple looked unassuming and even a bit frail, but Inevitability knew that he was anything but. He had always been mysterious to herself and her brother, and they did not even know his age or which hive he originated from.

They only knew that even before the integration, the two of them were unable to so much as touch his clothes when teaming up. Now that he had made massive strides in the Dao and racking up all those titles, he was far beyond their reach.

It was a shame, Inevitability thought. Their foster father had boundless

potential, and he could have conquered this world without breaking a sweat. Unfortunately, he was just too focused on the mission, to the point it was all-consuming.

“We wanted a backup plan for when the Lord arrives,” Inevitability admitted, not daring to lie. “We thought that if we kept that man happy, he would speak up for us. We didn’t expect him to detonate the puppets though, but rather capture the townspeople when the Lord Redeemer arrived.”

“Did you at least retrieve the Origin Funnel?” Void’s Disciple asked with a sigh.

“It was on Salvation’s body when he died. We believe it’s with his killers now,” Inevitability admitted with a grimace.

“So the fulcrum is currently not only walking around with one of the beacons that guide our Lord, but also all the Origin Dao that lunatic collected?” Void’s Disciple said, the air around him starting to twist and turn.

Void’s Disciple closed his eyes in exasperation and lightly started tapping his finger on the table. Inevitability started to shudder, as she knew that was a sign that he was greatly annoyed, and carnage almost always followed. But the tapping suddenly stopped, allowing Inevitability to breathe out in relief, feeling like a sacrificial offering being granted clemency.

“Well, it’s just one of the beacons, and the Funnel is just a copy the Lord made in his youth. The loss is regrettable, but not overly so. That Mystic Realm is far more important. If we can provide our Lord with that item inside, he will not care about our other failings,” Void’s Disciple muttered.

Inevitability ardently nodded, extremely happy to change the subject. The loss of the Funnel was a worthy price to get rid of that man, in her opinion. She might not have dared to kill Salvation herself, but the less competition, the better.

“What about the Church?” Inevitability hesitantly asked. “That thing is valuable, but I don’t believe the Great Lord is willing to make an enemy of the Church of Everlasting Dao.”

“Soon after it awakens, the entrances will close. All three of us will enter at that time,” Void’s Disciple calmly explained. “The Mystic Realm is completely separated with high-grade shielding. No karmic threads will leak out, allowing us to kill everything without holding back. Only the three of us need to return from that place; the rest can die inside, no matter if it’s the Church or the aboriginals.”

Inevitability’s eyes lit up in anticipation when she heard Void’s

proclamation. They had been forced to stay hidden for so long that her whole body was itching in anticipation. Her killing spree in the hunt had barely whet her appetite for blood, and they had avoided all interesting targets out of fear of exposing their intentions or their lord.

But it seemed that it all was coming to an end.

“Even the fulcrum?” Inevitability probed.

Fury still suffused Inevitability as she thought of her shameful display during the hunt. Every day she dreamed of tearing that man and that little chick apart, but she held herself back due to fear of the person in front of her.

“Nothing can go wrong inside the Mystic Realm,” Void’s Disciple said after a brief pause. “If he enters, then that’s his fate.”

Bloodlust started to leak from her body as Inevitability imagined running into Zachary Atwood inside the Mystic Realm. Perhaps she could trick that human into going there without Void finding out?

Zac and Ogras sat hidden inside an array, three hours from the battlefield. They had pushed their tired bodies to the limits to get as far away as possible from that place, afraid that someone would take advantage of their situation. But their bodies could only endure so much, and Ogras was unable to keep going after an hour, forcing Zac to carry him. Finally, they found a cave to hide in while they recuperated.

The moment they sat down, they ate a second set of healing pills, and as if by an unspoken agreement created some distance before they started to ponder on the Dao. They had both been in a desperate battle that had pushed them to their limits, and it was time to reap the benefits.

Zac had gained more from the last battle compared to all of the battles with the incursion leaders thus far. An all-out struggle was truly the best way to move forward. His eyes closed as he focused on the large axe fractal in his body. He wasn’t pondering on the Dao of Sharpness again, but rather on the Dao of Heaviness. It hadn’t been that long since he’d improved it the last time, since he’d evolved it during the hunt. But the previous battle had showcased multiple sources of heaviness for him, which he wanted to capitalize on.

The first was the three instances of pressure that his body had been

subjected to when summoning the axes for **[Deforestation]**. The last one had placed such a burden on him that his body almost collapsed, and if his bones hadn't broken first, even his soul would have been wounded. The first axe, **[Axe of Felling]**, had also contained a hint of imperviousness and solidity that was in a sense related to heaviness.

The second heaviness insight could be gleaned from the immense explosion that had almost killed them earlier. Just the shockwave from the blast had been powerful enough to cost him a quarter of his Miasma, and being within sustained errant energies was like being in a zone with far higher gravity. Zac believed the two insights together with other snippets he had gathered from various fights and other sources were enough to push his seed to the peak naturally.

He already possessed one Peak seed, but that one had come at the cost of multiple Dao Treasures, and he couldn't consume them so freely. Besides, Zac had noticed that the effect of the treasures was waning when he improved his Seed of Sharpness. He only had a few shots left to use Dao Treasures before they became useless.

At that point, he would need to get treasures of a higher grade, but it was a complete waste to use such a thing on a Dao Seed. The higher-grade Dao Treasures were rather meant to improve Dao Fragments, and they could save years of effort rather than months. To use them at this juncture was a complete waste.

The two were strapped for time, but both of them needed a day or two of recuperation before they could move again. Ogras was especially badly off, as his constitution was far inferior to Zac's. The golden beam had even wounded his psyche, which was much thornier to heal. Zac, therefore, didn't feel rushed when it took hours to enter a calm state of meditation, but when he finally arrived there, the rest came surprisingly easy.

Zac opened his eyes an unknown time later and, after glancing over, noticed that Ogras was still in the middle of meditation. Ogras even seemed to be in the middle of a breakthrough judging by the mysterious fluctuations surrounding him, and Zac closed his eyes again.

He didn't want to disturb the demon while he was right on the threshold of improving and instead focused on a second Dao Seed. This time, it was Sanctuary. He had been extremely close for a while now thanks to the partial vision; their desperate situation where Zac shielded the two from the blast was enough to push him over the edge.

When he opened his eyes the next time, he saw Ogras fiddling with something on the ground, and Zac's eyes widened in shock when he saw it was a piece of Salvation's head. More precisely, it was his forehead, which still had the shimmering golden fractal implanted in it.

"What the hell are you doing?!" Zac wheezed with alarm, knowing how terrible that fractal was. He even forgot checking on his boosted Daos due to the shocking scene.

"Oh, you're up?" Ogras said with a start, having been completely engrossed with the fractal. "I believe this is the control inscription for the array that allowed Salvation to possess so many puppets."

"You'd better not get any ideas," Zac muttered. "I'm pretty sure the array continuously consumed his life force. When I met him during the hunt, he looked slightly above my age, and you saw how rapidly he aged when that thing lit up. He might have been Emily's age when he got his hands on that cursed thing."

"Don't worry, I won't infuse my head with some unknown array. I have enough troublesome things in my body as it is." Ogras snorted.

Zac sighed, knowing the feeling all too well. The Multiverse was simply too full of double-edged treasures. Or perhaps it was fairer to say that nothing came without a price. A treasure wouldn't simply boost one's power to great heights without exacting a price in return. It was true for the creature living in Ogras' shadows, and it was true for the splinter in his head.

"Still, it is very interesting," Ogras continued. "I believe I have found a pretty important clue."

"Oh? What's that?" Zac asked with interest as he walked over.

His right arm was still mostly useless, as his bones hadn't mended, but at least the muscles in his body had healed enough for him to move about effortlessly. It would take a few more days to be able to push his body in a battle, though.

"This thing resonated with me when I evolved a Dao Seed," Ogras explained. "I think it contains Origin Dao."

"What?" Zac asked with surprise as he looked down on the fractal.

"I believe this treasure steals the Origin Dao of the people Salvation turned to puppets, storing it somehow," Ogras explained. "That would also fit with why that old goat wants to find these baby planets. It might be this type of thing that would be forced upon the so-called fulcrums."

Zac slowly nodded as he mulled over the information. It felt like they

were getting close to the truth, although they were still missing some pieces of information.

“It would also explain why such a powerful person as Salvation wasn’t even on the Dao Ladder,” Zac added. “The array might have stolen all the Origin Dao around him, including his own.”

“Exactly,” Ogras said with some excitement in his face. “So what I am thinking is this: what if we used all this Origin Dao for ourselves?”

Zac’s heartbeat sped up in anticipation as he looked down at the fractal. Even if his improvement was extremely rapid, it would take a lot of time to not only reach the peak with his six Dao Seeds but also fuse them into three Fragments.

The fusion itself was far harder than simply reaching the peak, but he was running out of time. But being bathed in a huge amount of Origin Dao might be the key to pushing his Dao further, allowing him to quickly evolve before the Dominators did something irreversible.

“So how would we go about getting our hands on the Origin Dao?” Zac asked with some glee on his face.

“Huh? I have no idea.” Ogras snorted. “We’ll need to do some research.”

Zac threw Ogras an even stare before shaking his head with annoyance.

“What about safety? Do you think the Dominators will be able to track that thing?” Zac asked.

Ogras frowned when he heard the news, and he looked down at the pouch fastened to his belt. But suddenly, his eyes lit up again.

“I can throw his corpse into the Mystic Realm for now. That place is completely isolated, and there’s no way the Dominators will be able to sense anything across dimensions. We can leisurely study the thing inside,” he said.

“Sounds like a plan,” Zac agreed with a nod. Creating a stable tunnel to the Mystic Realm was on his agenda in any case. “Keep me posted. Don’t try to keep that thing for yourself; there are a lot of people on our island who could benefit from that.”

“Fine. You ready to go?” Ogras said with a roll of his eyes.

The two kept as high a pace as they could, considering the state of their bodies. But it still took one day longer to return to the small outpost town the Marshall Clan controlled. The guards looked at Zac and Ogras as though they were monsters when they arrived, but their captain still stepped forward with a shocking revelation about worldwide explosions caused by Salvation.

Zac finally understood what Salvation meant with his words in the end,

but he knew there was nothing to be done about the situation. The two stepped through the teleporter back to Port Atwood, Zac's mood greatly dampened by the realization that over a million people had died because he'd killed Salvation.

But the two didn't even have time to digest the news of Salvation's final revenge as Emily rushed them the moment they stepped out of the teleporter.

“They've found it! They've finally found the underworld!”

This story continues in [Book 4](#).

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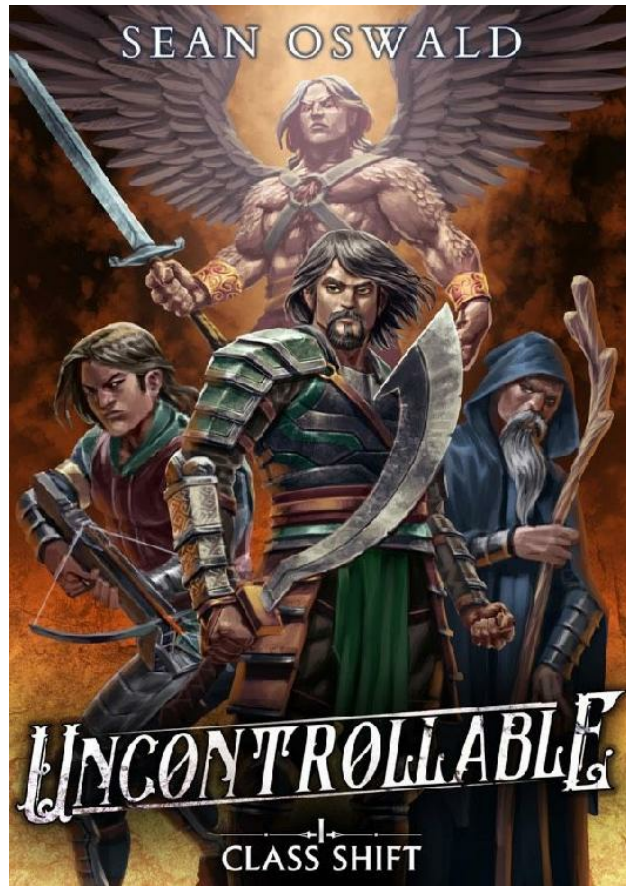
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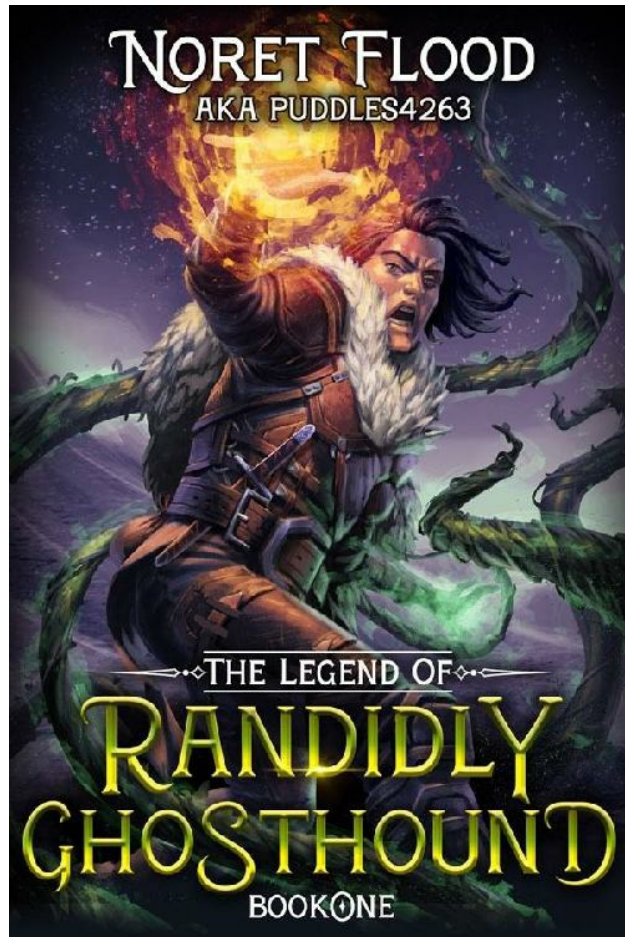
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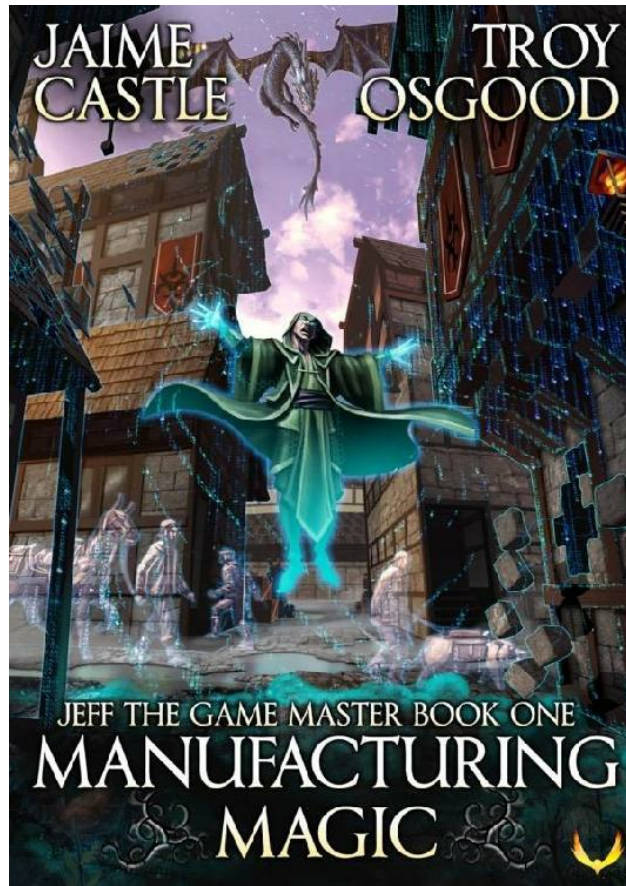
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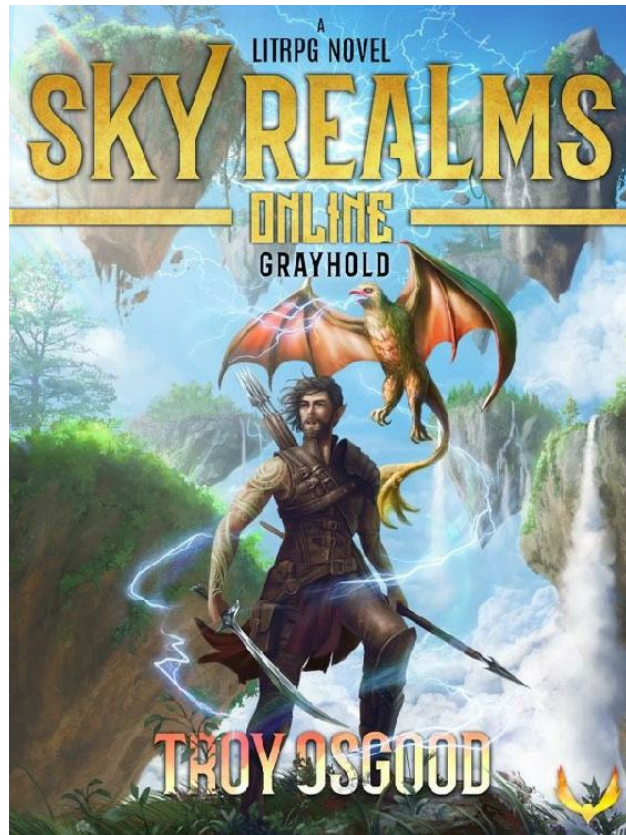
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I was in my garage when the space elves addressed the whole world.

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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